FAILURE TO FRUITION: HARVESTING LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM FAILURE

A THESIS-PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

MONIQUE DANIELLE MCMILLAN-JACKSON

MAY 2022

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To my parents: Judy and Lloyd

for instilling the value of education, faith in God, and unconditional love and support;

To my daughter: Naomi

for sacrifices made, enthusiastic encouragement, and inspiration,

Thanks and love to you all.

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ABSTRACT

Failure is universal and inevitable. Despite its negative connotation, this research study seeks to identify whether failure may ultimately have a positive transformative effect on leadership development. The process includes a qualitative research method utilizing interviews along with a study of biblical, management, psychological, and educational literature.

Research outcomes include a synthesis and analysis of school leader interviews as well as lessons gleaned from literature. These results may serve as a resource for examining the effects of failure on leadership and how this might inform teaching on the subject.

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Introduction

Significant understanding and learning can result from failure. However, people often do not like to talk about failure. Instead, we tend to gravitate towards sharing our successes. But what if the most valuable lessons that we could learn about life both professionally and personally could be learned from failure?

Anna Johnson shares her personal experience with failure that led to transformation. She recounts that she was in a difficult place professionally. She was employed as a Christian Education Director at a church. In addition to working at the church, Anna also worshipped there. At increasing intervals, she found herself clashing with her supervisors, the pastors. She believed that they nitpicked about small things. They would complain about her tardiness. In Anna's mind this complaint was unfounded. Why did it matter to them what time she arrived at work? They did not keep business hours themselves. Additionally, she worked well beyond her stated hours on a daily basis. If she arrived a little late, she more than made up for it. Isn't that what mattered most?

Anna did far more at the church than the duties listed on her job description. In fact, when another staff member resigned, they did not fill the vacancy. Instead, they asked Anna to absorb many of the responsibilities of the departed employee. She took on these additional responsibilities without complaint. How could they not appreciate the passion that she poured into all that she did?

Anna was convinced that her newly ordained pastors needed additional training. While they were well educated, they lacked pastoral experience. This was their first appointment as pastors. She felt that their cultural intelligence was lacking. In addition to complaining about punctuality, they also voiced grievances about her countenance. They told her that she needed to smile more often. To Anna, this came across as shallow, judgmental, and insensitive. To make matters worse, Anna's husband had been recently diagnosed with cancer. Her husband's medical care was dependent upon her medical insurance through her job. Her pastors knew this and yet they continued to write her up and sought her termination. Anna was grief stricken over her poor relationship with the pastors. Despite all of her best efforts, prayers to God, and counsel of others, she had failed in her ability to successfully communicate with her supervisors.

Ultimately, her supervisors were not successful in their efforts to terminate her employment. Anna was fortunate to have worked with the pastors' supervisor in a previous setting. The pastors' supervisor stated that Anna was exempt and that her occasional tardiness was not grounds for dismissal. Not long after this decision, the pastors were moved to another church. When the new pastors arrived, they were made aware of the previous difficulties that Anna had with their predecessors. Would there be a clean slate? How would Anna get along with the new pastors?

With the departure of the previous pastors, Anna resolved that things would be different in the future. Through personal time with God, the wise counsel of others, and an honest personal inventory, Anna knew that some changes were in order. She knew that she was responsible, in part, for the demise of the relationship with the previous pastors. Instead of humbling accepting their criticism on her punctuality, she took their words as a character attack. This led to a downward spiral and reactivity on both sides. Authentic communication was

jettisoned, and a terse superficiality was left in its place. Anna had failed in her ability to communicate effectively. Understanding her personal shortcomings, led to personal transformation.

Anna learned to set into place more appropriate boundaries. She resolved to arrive to work on time each day, whether or not she was the only person there. She endeavored to work proactively with the new pastors to understand their expectations of how she was to perform her duties. She also learned to free herself from the pressure of doing more than what was asked of her. In turn, this diminished her feelings of being taken for granted. Anna ultimately achieved a wonderful working relationship with the new pastors that was sustained over a number of years. However, it is important to note that this transformation occurred after a very painful period of failure.

Our example with Anna reflects personal and professional failure on a small scale. However, failure occurs in larger contexts as well. Failure can be observed in social, institutional and international contexts. This larger scale reckoning with failure has been on particular display in recent years in America with social justice issues ranging from voting rights to climate justice, healthcare, refugee crisis, racial injustice, income gaps, gun violence, and hunger and food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shed light on crises at the international level. The sharp disparities in availability and access to life saving testing, equipment and vaccines point to a failure to meet the needs of all humanity in equal measure.

Colin Feltham posits that failure is inevitable cognitively, biologically, and morally. It includes everything from the smallest of failures such as getting someone's name wrong, missing a train, missing a penalty in a football match, through habitual failures such as addictions,

personal cognitive errors and common epistemological fallacies, to large-scale and even ruinous social, ecological and cosmic failures.[1]

Background

Like Anna, I had a personally transformative experience with failure. Four years into full-time ministry, I fell short of a standard that I set for myself. While no one else really knew about it; I did. For several months, I harbored an enormous amount of guilt and shame. I failed. I wrestled with this failure, largely alone, and in silence. In time, and through the Spirit, I came to realize that God transforms leaders' lives by using failure and brokenness to cause growth. I began to grasp that the best leadership often springs from ashes and that God uses us because of our brokenness, not in spite of our brokenness.[2] Harvesting leadership lessons in our own lives and through the accounts of others, enables us to move from failure to fruition.

Thesis-Project Overview

This grappling with failure is inevitable. At some point in life, each of us will experience failure. Hence, the necessity to explore and further understand failure. In the course of this project, I will take time to describe the word failure, looking at the varying descriptions of failure as well as the connotation that follows. I will also explore how different environments view failure. For example, do churches view failure differently than independent schools? If so, how? Oftentimes, failure in the church is viewed negatively. Conversely, failure in educational settings is frequently viewed as essential for learning.

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1. Colin Feltham, *Failure*: *The Art of Living* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2014), 6.

2. Harv Powers, *Redemptive Leadership: Unleashing Your Greatest Influence* (Illumify Media Global, 2019), 14.

I will also examine the impact of failure on leadership. Naturally, failure can have either a positive or negative effect. For the purposes of this project, I will explore the potentially positive transformative effect of failure on leadership in the context of the Bible and a specific Washington, DC Metro Area independent school.

Hypothesis

This thesis-project will explore what leadership lessons might be harvested from personal failure. Specifically, this research will answer the following questions: How have transformational moments impacted the leadership of key biblical figures? How is failure described and perceived in psychological, management, and educational literature? How have transformational moments impacted the leadership of some independent school administrators in the Washington, DC Metro Area? What conclusions might be drawn from this research? I hypothesize that transformational moments may serve to strengthen and expand the leadership capacity of independent school leaders in the Washington, DC Metro Area.

Project Design: Interviewing Independent School Leaders

To test this hypothesis, I will put together a series of three to four questions to ask a pool of six to ten leaders at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school. These questions will anchor our interview time. However, follow-up questions may arise during the interview and the conversation will be allowed to go naturally where it leads. The standard interview questions will probe whether or not independent school leaders have had experiences with failure that had a transformative effect on their leadership. I will work with my mentor, Dr. Robert Mayer, an expert interviewer, to craft these questions. I will take care to protect the identities of the interviewees. They will be referred to by pseudonym. I will also gather demographic information on each interviewee that will be shared in an aggregate fashion. This will further

protect the identity of each individual. The interviews will be conversational in nature and I will endeavor to make the interviewees comfortable in the interview setting. I will also gather demographic information from the Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington on the gender and racial composition of students, faculty, and administrators in the Washington, DC Metro Area.

Outcome

After completing the research portion of my project and conducting interviews, I will provide an analysis of the findings. These findings will include the interviews as well as my examination of key figures in the Bible. I will also offer potential answers to what conclusions can be drawn from this research. Further, I will explore how this might be applied to spiritual life and various ministry contexts, including independent schools.

Chapter two will explore the biblical and theological foundations of failure. A study of the Bible reveals that failure is a part of life. We see this in the world around us, ourselves, and scripture. In this chapter, I will explore failure as first recorded with Adam and Eve, Old Testament leaders such as Saul, David, the kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms, Elijah, New Testament leaders such as John Mark, Paul, and Peter. Each of these figures was impacted by failure in some capacity. Yet, God continued to use each of these individuals for his purposes. A study of their lives begins to reveal a biblical and theological foundation for how God uses failure to transform leaders.

Chapter three will explore a range of literature that engages the topic of failure. Through this research, I aim to synthesize lessons learned from failure so that concepts gleaned may be made available to administrators to strengthen the leadership of independent school leaders. To deepen my research, I will review management literature on failure. I will also survey books that

focus on failure in educational settings. In education, this concept is often referred to as risk taking. Finally, I will focus on books that discuss a redemptive leadership model. This is the ultimate thrust of this research. God uses humanity, including their failures, to accomplish his purposes.

Chapter four will outline and describe my research methodology. This project seeks to identify whether failure may ultimately have a positive transformative effect on leadership development. I will interview a wide pool of leaders at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school to determine if these leaders have personally experienced such a leadership transformation. I will synthesize and analyze the results of the interviews as well as lessons gleaned from key biblical figures. I will share these results with select educational institutions as a resource for examining the effects of failure on leadership and how this might inform their teaching on the subject with their respective students and colleagues.

In chapter five, I will take time for reflection on the project as a whole. I will summarize the results and draw conclusions about the research. I will indicate that this research applies only to the 6-10 people interviewed. I will also share that based upon the research with this sample, it is likely that if we do further research, we may discover something about how other educators process failure. Additionally, I will explore questions such as: What did I learn about interviewing others? What did their narrative accounts reveal? Are there any lessons to be harvested from failure? If so, what might they be? How might the voices of these leaders be amplified to a larger audience? And finally, I will conclude with future research possibilities based upon how school administrators process failure in the classroom and workplace.

The goal of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of failure and its potentially positive impact on personal and professional development. I would like to

destigmatize failure and remind readers that it is not an end point. My hope is that this work offers readers, most notably, school leaders, insight into how failure can ultimately have a positive, transformative impact on leadership, if viewed through a redemptive lens.

CHAPTER 2: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

From the creation of humanity, humans were to depend on God for leadership, guidance, and provision. For a period of time in the garden of Eden, this plan unfolded as designed. But then, humans failed to follow the commands set forth by God. Since then, humanity has struggled with failure in various forms. Yet God, in his enduring mercy, has established a path forward from failure. This is seen most powerfully in the redemptive work of Christ. But it is not limited to that act alone. God uses *all* the events of our lives, both positive and negative, to forge in us our redemptive influence for his kingdom. God works powerfully in and through our weakness.[1]

We have seen this demonstrated in the Bible and world around us. But what if today's leaders could better understand this transformative phenomena so they could exert their greatest influence for the kingdom? This chapter will explore the biblical and theological foundations of failure. More specifically, I will explore failure as first recorded with Adam and Eve, Old Testament leaders such as Saul, David, the kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms, Elijah, and New Testament leaders such as John Mark, Paul, and Peter.

Failure First Recorded: Adam and Eve

The first recorded case of failure in scripture is found in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 2:16-17, God commanded the man, "'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will

1. Harv Powers, *Redemptive Leadership: Unleashing Your Greatest Influence* (Illumify Media Global, 2019), 14.

certainly die.'"[2] For a period of time, man obeys this command. Woman is created and she is approached by the crafty serpent. The serpent entices the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."[3]

By eating the fruit, woman and man failed to obey God. They did what was right in their own eyes. They were aiming to be masters of good and evil, to be autonomous and so to determine the course of life without reference to God.[4] Despite their disobedience, God charted a path forward for them. Unlike the serpent, neither the woman nor the man is cursed, but the ground is cursed.[5] Before their failure, God had charged them with filling the earth, subduing it, and ruling over the fish, birds, and every living creature that moved on the ground. After their waywardness, God's plan remained the same. However, there were consequences. Genesis 3: 16-

2. Gen. 2:16-17 (NIV).

3. Gen. 3: 1-6.

4. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 945.

5. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 945.

19 recounts the cost of failing to keep God's commands. Man's consequences would be meted out through his work with the ground. The woman, in the relationships where she finds her fulfillment, dignity, and joy, will now find pain, suffering, and subordination.[6]

"To the woman he said, 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.' To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'"

In this first recorded act of disobedience, we see God's redemptive hand at work. Yes, Adam and Even failed. Yet, it did not alter God's plan. They were still called to be fruitful, subdue the earth, and rule over creation. It would not be easy for them to accomplish their purpose, but it would be possible. From the very beginning, we see God's mercy present in human weakness.

This first recorded act of failure is significant. Through Adam and Eve, sin and condemnation to death came into the world. Humanity was exposed as created, limited, weak, with that dynamic in-built drive to know, to continue the species, and to reach beyond, and hence to burst its limitations and to be independent of the creator.[7] Humanity would follow a pattern set in motion by Adam and Eve: limitation, transgression, punishment, and the need for saving

6. Freedman, 946.
7. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 946.

action. As the events of the Old and New Testaments unfold, we witness the redemptive reign of grace and righteousness which comes through the second Adam (Jesus) confronting the reign of sin and death introduced through the first Adam and overcoming it.[8]

Failure in Old Testament Leaders

Instead of honoring God, Adam and Even did what was right in their own eyes. As humanity evolved, this pattern of turning away from God continued. In 1 Samuel 8: 4-22, we find Israel failing to honor God as their leader. Like her idol worshipping neighbors, Israel desired a king. Israel's quest for a king would lead her on a path fraught with failure and centuries of idolatry. We will examine Old Testament leaders such as Saul, David, the kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms and Elijah and their experiences with failure.

Saul

In 1 Samuel 8: 4-9, we read "So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, 'You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.' But when they said, 'Give us a king to lead us,' this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.'"

Here we find that Israel has failed supremely. The Israelites were to look to God for guidance. He was to be their leader. He was to fight their battles. But they rejected him. They

8. Freedman, 64.

wanted to be like all of the other nations, instead of God's chosen people. This decision would haunt Israel for centuries. Who would be Israel's king? The answer would be Saul of Gibeah.

In many ways, Saul was an unlikely choice for king. When Samuel makes the statement that all the desire of Israel has turned to Saul and his whole family line, Saul replies, "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?[9]"

In this moment, Saul is sincerely incredulous. It is beyond him to consider himself worthy of such a statement. But he is, in fact, God's choice for the stiff necked Israelites who insisted upon a king. God revealed this to Samuel and instructed him to anoint Saul as king. While Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, he did possess some worldly appeal. He was described as handsome and a head taller than others. When the Israelites saw him, they shouted, "long live the king!"[10] But Saul's outward appearance did not make him ready for kingship. On the contrary, he needed to be equipped by God. God desires that his leaders have a heart sensitive to him and his leading.

In 1 Samuel 10, God conditions Saul for kingship by changing his heart.[11] God also surrounds Saul with valiant men with changed hearts. We see a glimmer of the divine plan in this development. God's chosen must be anointed and undergo a changed heart. The heart of the leader is to be surrendered to God. Those close to the leader should reflect a surrendered heart to God as well.

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9. 1 Sam. 8: 21.

10. 1 Sam. 10: 24.

11. 1 Sam. 10: 24.

For a period of time, Saul is obedient to God. He is anointed king of Israel, prophesies in the Spirit, and establishes himself as a victor in battle. He defeats the Philistines. Yet, in time, Saul's modesty comes to an end. In 1 Samuel 15: 17-23, we find the following dialogue between Samuel and Saul.

> Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?"
>
> "But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal."
>
> But Samuel replied:
> "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
> as much as in obeying the LORD?
> To obey is better than sacrifice,
> and to heed is better than the fat of rams.
> For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
> and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.
> Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
> he has rejected you as king."

Saul failed to obey God's command in his attack against the Amalekites. As a result, God rejected him as king. Samuel pronounced this judgement. And while Saul confessed that he had sinned and violated the Lord's command and instructions, Samuel would not bend. Saul begged Samuel to forgive his sin and to return with him. Samuel refused. Samuel himself accomplished the will of God and put the king of the Amalekites to death. Samuel then returned to his home in Gibeah. While Samuel honored the commands of the Lord, his heart mourned for Saul. Saul's

failure to obey God led to his forfeiture of blessing as king of Israel. In Saul's place, another would rise: King David.

David

A study of King David's life will show him as a shepherd, musician, poet, warrior, politician, administrator, a standard for later kings, and a messianic symbol.[12] Yet despite these accolades, David experiences great moral failure in his coveting of Uriah's wife, adultery, lying, sending Uriah off to his death, and other indiscretions. There are consequences for David's failure. Despite repenting, fasting, mourning, and praying, David's son with Bathsheba would die. King David would not be permitted to build the temple. But God continued to use him as king. Perhaps this is because of the attitude of David's heart? David is twice referred to "as a man after God's own heart."[13] God promised David that he would have an everlasting throne, everlasting kingdom, "Son of God" relationship, that his son would build the temple, and that his covenant with him would not be broken. God was gracious to David in spite of sin.[14]

The Kings' Collective Failure

Despite his failures, King David had a heart for God. The kings that followed David and his son in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, would struggle with the abominable sin of idolatry. Their catastrophic failure to follow God's command to love and serve him alone would result in exile and captivity. God used the voices of prophets to attack the religious, social, and

12. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 41.

13. 1 Sam. 13: 14 and Acts 13:22.

14. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*, 2014.

moral abuse of their nation and its leaders.[15] These prophets declared that the nation was under the judgment of God and facing imminent disaster due to their idolatrous and immoral ways. Fortunately, judgment was not the final word for Israel. The promise of future salvation is one of the most distinctive messages of the Old Testament prophets.[16]

King Solomon succeeds David as king of Israel. He builds the temple in Jerusalem and God's glory fills the temple. He proves himself to be a wise king in many ways. Yet, Solomon, does not heed the wisdom of God's commands. Instead, he has many wives and their idols infiltrate Israel. The kingdom is split and torn from his son Rehoboam.

In the Northern Kingdom, the next 200 years are filled with persistent idolatry and disobedience. Initially, King Jeroboam I is given a great promise. "If you do whatever I command you and walk in obedience to me and do what is right in my eyes by obeying my decrees and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you."[17] This is a tremendous promise that God is giving to Jeroboam. However, Jeroboam fails to follow God's commands. He builds altars at Dan and Bethel and has non-Levites as priests. Additionally, he made two idols that were to be "Israel's gods." So great was his disobedience that the prophet Ahijah spoke these words to Jeroboam's wife in 1 Kings 14 9-10, "You [Jeroboam] have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have

15. John Bright, *Covenant and Promise: The Prophetic Understanding of the Future in Pre-Exilic Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 1.

16. Bright, *Covenant and Promise*, 1.

17. 1 Kings 11:38.

aroused my anger and turned your back on me. Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam."

Jeroboam's idolatry resulted in a disastrous end to his reign. It also set into motion what John Bright would call "the internal sickness of Israel."[18] Despite the material wealth that Israel's upper class enjoyed, posh buildings, population growth, economic and agricultural resources, weaving, and dyeing industries, Israel was spiritually destitute.[19] Israel was in an advanced state of decay socially, morally, and religiously. The prophet Amos decried the lack of social justice and the abuses of the poor. Israel's social structure had undergone a change.

Initially, Israel was a tribal federation formed in covenant with God with no class distinctions. Social obligations were understood and arbitrated through covenant law. With the emergence of the monarchy, obligation shifted to the crown and a privileged class arose. By the eighth century, Yahwism remained the national religion in name only. Covenant law was not observed.[20] So severe was the idolatry in Israel that the Samaria Ostraca yielded as many names compounded with "Ba'al" as "Yahweh."[21] Tragically, many Israelites were Ba'al worshippers.

The kings who followed: Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, and Omri each failed to fully honor God and put an end to Israel's idolatrous ways. But none of Jeroboam's predecessors compared to the evil of King Ahab.[22]

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18. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster J. Knox Press, 2000), 259.

19. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 259.

20. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 260.

21. Bright, 260-261.

22. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*, 2014.

King Ahab was the son and successor of Omri. He ruled northern Israel during the second quarter of the ninth century.[23] The Deuteronomistic and prophetic traditions describe him as the worst northern king.[24] 1 Kings 16: 29-33 recounts:

> In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.

Because of these and other vile acts, God pronounces judgement. He says that:

> 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will wipe out your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have aroused my anger and have caused Israel to sin.'
> And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'
> 'Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country.'
> (There was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)[25]

Ahab failed utterly, and his idolatrous ways resulted in judgement. After hearing these words, Ahab is remorseful and repentant. He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and fasts. Because of Ahab's sincere repentance, God shows compassion. God speaks to Elijah, "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not

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23. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 100.

24. Freedman, 100.
25. 1 Kings 21: 21-26.

bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."[26] We witness from this exchange that our response to failure is important to God. God desires remorse and repentance for disobedience. Our response to failure influences God's response to us.

Because of Ahab's repentance, divine judgement is delayed.[27] Paradoxically, he is spared and his son is condemned. This portion of scripture is known as the ending of the original regal self-judgement narrative.[28] It teaches that power corrupts and that God checks that power and calls it to account. It warns that if divine judgement seems slow in coming, wait; the announcement may have been designed for a generation still to come.[29]

The northern kings that followed Ahab: Ahaziah, Jehoram, and Jehu continued to allow idols to remain. In Jehu, we witness glimmers of a stand for the Lord. Jehu kills Ahab's sons and Baal worshippers. Yet, the calf idols remain and Jehu pays tribute to Assyrian Shalmaneser III. After King Jehu, Jehoahaz, Jehoash, Jeroboam II Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekahiah, Pekah, and Hoshea reign. These kings allowed Israel's sin of idolatry to fester and flourish. They did not quell the abuse of the poor. The prophet Amos decried the lack of justice and abounding bribes.

According to Amos, the Israelites assumed that their devotion to cultic ritual exempted them from the requirements of righteousness and social justice and from the consequences of

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26. 1 Kings 21: 27-29.

27. Simon J. De Vries, *1 Kings*, 2nd ed. Word Biblical Commentary, v. 12. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 258.

28. De Vries, *1 Kings*, 258.

29. De Vries, 258.

wrongdoing.[30] Erroneously, they believed that through sacrifice they could guarantee divine favor and their own survival.[31] Their pursuit of wealth rather than righteousness elicited severe judgement from Amos. He denounced Israel's violent, oppressive, exploitative society.[32] The economic plight of the poor was so difficult that they had to sell themselves into slavery to pay off small debts. Even the courts were corrupt and the wealthy falsified weights and measures to further defraud the poor. Four ideological messages emerged from Amos: the socio-economic lifestyle of the Israelites was opposed to traditional values; socioeconomic reorganization without compassion is not acceptable; the resulting oppression of the poor cannot be tolerated; and participation in the cultus gives a false sense of confidence.[33] Despite the prophetic warnings Israel received, her kings do not listen. They have failed to keep their covenant with God. As a result, the Northern Kingdom comes to an end in 722 B.C.E.[34]

Like the Northern Kingdom, the Southern Kingdom could not shake the scourge of idolatry. The Southern Kingdom bore the kings that would be heirs to God's promises of an everlasting throne and everlasting kingdom. Unlike God, their rulers failed to keep their promises to serve God alone.

In 930 B.C.E., King Rehoboam became Judah's first ruler of the Southern Kingdom. Rehoboam was foolhardy and arrogant. He was in a strong position to continue the united monarchy. He was readily accepted as the leader of Judah where his dynastic succession was not

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30. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 206.

31. Freedman, 206.

32. Freedman, 206.

33. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 206.

34. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*. 2014.

questioned. When he traveled to Shechem to be acclaimed as king by representatives of the northern tribes, he had an opportunity to unite the kingdoms. The representatives asked that the heavy burden of the *corvee* levied by King Solomon be abated. Rehoboam refused to honor this request and the schism between the northern and southern kingdoms was cemented.[35] As Rehoboam progressed in his kingship, he failed to honor God and allowed abominations like the surrounding nations including pagan religious practices and cult prostitutes.

His successor, Abijah does evil as well. King Asa succeeds Abijah and abolishes cult prostitutes, removes idols, and renews the covenant. However, pagan religion remains. King Jehoshaphat forges an alliance with the notorious northern King Ahab. And while he carries out religious reforms, appoints judges, has the Levites serve as priests and trusts God, pagan religion remains.[36]

Succeeding kings Jehoram and Ahaziah both do evil like Ahab. King Athaliah kills the royal family. Jehoida the priest then anoints Joash as king. King Joash initially destroys Baal but then succumbs to idolatry. He kills the priest and is then murdered. King Amaziah permits idols from Edom and is succeeded by King Uzziah. Uzziah builds up the kingdom. Under his reign, Judah experiences a golden age.

During this time, Uzziah is credited with repairing the defenses of Jerusalem, reorganizing and refitting the army, and devising new equipment for use in time of siege.[37] Uzziah conducted offensive operations and imposed control on Edomite lands, and he consolidated Judah's position along the trade routes by operations against north-western Arabian

35. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 230.
36. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*. 2014.

37. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 258.

tribes.[38] He had control of the Negeb and southern desert and thrust his frontiers deep into the coastal plain, taking Gath, Jabneh, and Ashdod, and built cities in Philistine territory.[39] With peace between Judah and Israel, the country experienced a peace and prosperity not enjoyed since the time of Solomon.

Despite the great gains experienced during Uzziah's reign, pagan religion remains. Like Uzziah, King Jotham does right but he is not successful in abolishing pagan religion. Jotham is followed by Ahaz. King Ahaz sacrifices to idols, does not trust God, permits abominations and commits child sacrifice. He is like the northern kings. Instead of relying on God, Ahaz asks Assyria for help.[40]

King Hezekiah is undoubtedly a bright spot in the history of the rulers of Judah. He was king of Judah ca. 715-687 B.C.E. He became king at the age of twenty-five and ruled for twenty-nine years.[41] He brought about covenant renewal, removed the high places, cleansed the temple, restored Passover and worship, and trusted God.[42] He was also highly regarded by the nations. Overwhelmingly, Hezekiah was considered a righteous king. But he, too, experienced failure in his leadership. 2 Chronicles 32: 24-26 tells of Hezekiah's pride. **"**In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the LORD, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah

38. Bright, 258.

39. Bright, 258.

40. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*. 2014.

41. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 189.

42. Kaminski, 2014.

repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come on them during the days of Hezekiah."

Hezekiah demonstrates that failure is common to all, even the righteous. However, he also demonstrates the appropriate response to failure. He repented of his pride. His sincere repentance elicited a response from God. God held back his wrath on Hezekiah and Judah.

The Hebrew word used to express repentance means simply "to turn."[43] The idea of repentance was that one would turn away from sin and turn towards God. One's relationship with Yahweh was to be an ongoing journey that required a keen focus on Him. Deviance from this focus on Yahweh was synonymous with losing sight of life's most important objective.[44]

Hezekiah understood the importance of turning to God. When the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, launched an offense against Judah, Hezekiah turned to God. Some historians claim that Sennacherib's attacks on Judah resulted in 200,150 captives and the razing of forty-six fortified cities.[45] When Sennacherib's troops approached Jerusalem, 2 Chronicles 32 details how they hurled extensive insults at the God of Israel. They declared that no god could save Judah from their military dominance. Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah cried out in prayer to God. God answered their prayer and sent an angel to annihilate the Assyrian troops. Disgraced, Sennacherib returned to his homeland. The Lord saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem because they turned to him to fight their battle. This "turning to God" and the resulting defeat of the Assyrians is significant because it delayed the fall of Jerusalem for another century.

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43. Freedman, 671.

44. Freedman, 671.

45. Freedman, 192.

After the reign of righteous King Hezekiah, Manasseh assumes the throne. Manasseh is not like Hezekiah. Manasseh fails to honor God. He builds altars for Baal, permits child sacrifice, witchcraft, mediums, and spiritists. There are idols in the temple. While Manasseh repents, it is clear that judgement is coming against Judah for failing to keep the commands of God.[46]

King Amon does evil and is followed by Josiah. Under Josiah's leadership, the law is found and there is covenant renewal. It is a common opinion by biblical scholars that the law book discovered by Josiah formed at least part of the book of Deuteronomy.[47] Josiah is obedient to God and removes mediums, witchcraft, spiritists and tears down altars. He destroys idols and celebrates Passover.[48] Josiah is quick to set things right for God. He wastes no time. In many ways, this urgency is attributed positively to Josiah. However, there was one battle that Josiah engaged in that seemed ill advised. It would, in fact, be his last.

In this skirmish, Josiah fails to heed the message from God delivered by Necho, king of Egypt.

> After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Necho king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah marched out to meet him in battle. But Necho sent messengers to him, saying, "What quarrel is there, king of Judah, between you and me? It is not you I am attacking at this time, but the house with which I am at war. God has told me to hurry; so stop opposing God, who is with me, or he will destroy you."
> Josiah, however, would not turn away from him, but disguised himself to engage him in battle. He would not listen to what Necho had said at God's command but went to fight him on the plain of Megiddo.
> Archers shot King Josiah, and he told his officers, "Take me away; I am badly wounded." So they took him out of his chariot, put him in his other chariot and

46. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*, 2014.

47. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1016.

48. Kaminski, 2014.

> brought him to Jerusalem, where he died. He was buried in the tombs of his ancestors, and all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for him.[49]

This encounter teaches us that sometimes God speaks through an unlikely messenger. Josiah failed to heed the message from God delivered through Necho. This resulted in his death. Josiah's actions also had a larger significance for Judah.[50] The declining state of the Assyrian empire in 605 B.C.E., prompted the resurgence of Egypt and Babylon, two powers that had long been subject to Assyria.[51] The Egyptian and Babylonian attempts to reestablish their ancient spheres of influence and territorial claims, would prove ruinous for Judah and her highly desirous strategic location on the sole land bridge linking three continents.[52] When Josiah engaged Necho on the plain of Megiddo, he caused a delay in the Egyptian and Assyrian forces uniting against Babylon. Had Josiah not delayed Necho, the battle at Carchemish might have ended differently. Perhaps, the united Egyptian and Assyrian forces might have defeated Babylon. In turn, this could have impacted the subsequent fall of the Southern Kingdom to Babylon in 586 B.C.E. Hereby, Josiah's failure to heed God's messenger had a larger impact on the fate of Judah. While Josiah's life ended in Jerusalem as a result of this choice, his greater legacy of following and serving God endured.

The kings who followed Josiah did not share his legacy of following and serving God. Kings Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah all did evil in the eyes of God. In 586

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49. 2 Chron. 35: 20-24.

50. John Watts and Ralph P Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 291.

51. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 291.

52. Watts, 291.

B.C.E., the Southern Monarchy ends with the fall of Jerusalem and Zedekiah as the last king. Judah is exiled to Babylon.[53] The curses of failing to abolish idolatry and serve God alone have fallen upon his people.

Elijah

In addition to the failure of the kings, we also observe failure in God's spiritual leaders in the Old Testament. The prophet Elijah is one such example. Elijah emerges as a bold leader for God's people. He confronted a sitting king and caused the rain to stop for more than three years, was fed by ravens, saw a limitless jar of flour and jug of oil, witnessed a widow's son resurrected, and singularly triumphed over hundreds prophets of Baal by calling down fire from heaven.[54]

Elijah's slaughter of the defeated prophets of Baal infuriates King Ahab's wife, Jezebel. Jezebel vows to see him dead within a day. Her zeal to kill him caused Elijah to falter. He could not withstand the pressure. He failed to rely on God to fight on his behalf. Instead, he fled into the wilderness. Elijah was undone, feeling completely isolated and imperiled. Despite the failure of his fleeing, God poured into Elijah. He fed him and allowed him to rest. After a time, God answered Elijah's complaints and he encouraged Elijah with a still, small voice that he was not alone. This exchange demonstrates God's compassion even when we fall short.

Failure in New Testament Leaders

Like Elijah and the kings of the Old Testament, New Testament leaders also struggled with failure. John Mark, Paul, and Peter shed light on various types of failure and how God responds. In each instance, God did not abandon his leader. This compassionate response to

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53. Kaminski, *Old Testament Timeline*, 2014.

54. 1 Kings 17-18.

failure may serve to provide hope today for leaders that are wrestling with issues. Instead of condemnation, God empowered these leaders to complete the work that was begun in them. An examination of these leaders and their struggles with failure demonstrate God's continued redemptive work in humanity.

John Mark

We learn more about failure from examining the life and ministry of John also known as Mark. John Mark worked as an assistant to Paul and Barnabas as they presented the Good News in Cyprus. While he initially seemed to be fully committed to the cause, he eventually deserted Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia. This desertion ultimately led to a major rift between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas wanted to accept John Mark back. Paul, on the other hand, was insistent that it would be unwise to allow him back as he had previously left the work. This disagreement was so serious that it broke up the Paul and Barnabas ministry team. Paul left the area with Silas as his new ministry partner and Barnabas accepted John Mark back.

The parting of ways between Paul and Barnabas is significant for many reasons. It teaches us that despite human conflict, the mission must continue.[55] God uses the conflict, which is not portrayed positively, to produce two ministry teams.[56] The mission of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles, as determined at the Jerusalem Council, is paramount. Their conflict over John Mark also demonstrates that honorable values can be at odds. In this scenario, Barnabas favored forgiveness.

55. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3, 15:1-23:35 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2299.

56. Keener, *Acts*, 2299.

Paul favored wholehearted commitment. When absolute values are at odds, conflict is often unavoidable. Their parting is likely recorded so as to explain the change in Paul's ministry partner.[57]

The schism also shines a light on how the virtue of mercy was perceived in the context of the book of Acts. Barnabas's willingness to extend mercy to John Mark would have been viewed as praiseworthy by people of rank in antiquity.[58] Sages were to nurture growth. They were not to be like the harshest Cynics.[59] In contrast, the term used for Paul's judgement against John Mark was more a matter of prudence than moral consideration.[60] Paul felt the urgency to reach the unevangelized Gentiles. The risk of a potential repeat defector was significant. He could not risk the mission. People in antiquity thought it foolhardy to entrust something important to someone who had already proven to be unreliable. Examples of this include Cicero's admonition to a governor of Asia to "treat all courteously but to admit to his inner circle only those who have proved themselves trustworthy."[61] Other practical guidance called for leaders to observe their subordinates for two years before placing full confidence in them. If any red flag behavior was observed, one should not stake their honor on that person's behalf. Similarly, teachers often tested their students. Naysayers

57. Keener, 2299.

58. Keener, 2300.

59. Keener, 2300.

60. Keener, 2301.

61. Keener, 2302.

would attest that a disciple's missteps reflected poorly on the teacher.[62] For all of these reasons, Paul expected his fellow laborers to be disciplined and prepared to endure hardships.[63]

The dispute regarding John Mark teaches us another lesson about failure in scripture. Biographers often included unfavorable episodes about even mostly positive characters.[64] John Mark's failure and the subsequent fallout between Paul and Barnabas is not downplayed. Their disagreement is not portrayed as a "gentle and reasoned decision based on what would be the most strategic for the kingdom."[65] Instead, it was an "emotionally charged conflict."[66] The inclusion of this account allows readers to learn from both positive and negative historical examples. On the level of Acts' theology, however, God's sovereign plan in the outcome may be more important.[67] In this exchange, we observe that the mission to strengthen the churches is carried forward.[68] (Acts 15: 39-40).

Despite John Mark's clear personal failure, we see God's redemptive work in John Mark later in Colossians 4. There, we find Paul and John Mark together in prison for the cause. Paul declares that John Mark has been a comfort to him and that he should be welcomed by the believers if he is able to make it to them. Clearly, John Mark's earlier failure did not bar him from effective

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62. Keener, 2302.

63. 2 Tim. 2: 3-4.

64. Keener, 2304.

65. Keener, 2307.

66. Keener, 2307.

67. Keener, 2304.

68. Acts 15: 39-40.

ministry. In fact, the opposite is true. John Mark experienced transformation. He pivoted from desertion to a steadfast commitment to Christ that resulted in chains and ministry to someone that previously rebuffed him.

Paul

Note that the same Paul that pushed against the shortcomings of John Mark, also experienced a radical transformation. Before he was known as Paul, he was known as Saul of Tarsus, a devout Jew. Saul was zealous in his faith and persecution of Christ followers. The Book of Acts recounts the harrowing tale of numerous believers arrested and imprisoned on account of Saul. Even worse, he was present at and approved of the murder of Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr. Imagine the inner turmoil and anguish that Saul experienced on the road to Damascus. This personal encounter with Jesus left him lamenting his ruthless persecution of Christ followers. Saul had failed in his quest to be a defender of the faith. We know this failure had a transformational impact upon Saul now known as Paul. Paul would become one of the most prolific writers of the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 1: 15-15, Paul declares: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” Paul also acknowledges his shortcomings in Philippians 3: 1-12. In that passage, he proclaims that he has no righteousness that comes from the law. Rather, he possesses only a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. After a rocky start, Paul lived his remaining days faithfully spreading the Good News of Jesus.

Peter

Like Paul, Peter also experienced a failure of faith. This is somewhat shocking considering Peter's bravado, commitment, and proximity to Jesus. In Matthew 14, we find that he was the only disciple willing to try walking on water. In Matthew 16 and Mark 8, Peter was the first recorded person to call Jesus the Christ and Son of God. When Jesus was arrested, he was willing to go to battle to defend him. He cut off the ear of the high priest's servant who accompanied the detachment of soldiers, chief priests and Pharisees. How is it then that in chapter 18 of John, we find that the same Peter that was willing to battle to defend Jesus, has denied him?

Earlier, when Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him, Peter's repudiation is clear. Yet, that is exactly what he does. Mark 14:32 tells us that Peter broke down and wept after realizing that he had in fact disowned Jesus three times. But as we have observed, God is not done with Peter. He continues to use him. Even in Peter's failure, God's power is on full display. The one who rejected the Prince of Peace, is not bound in shame forever. Instead, Peter is transformed and released into a powerful leader and preaching force who brought thousands into a saving knowledge of Jesus. Jesus's reinstatement of Peter in John 21 provides an example of the redemptive leadership model.[69]

In that passage, we observe Peter's pivotal transformation after an experience with failure. The crucible experience of denying Jesus prompted an inward journey of transformation as evidenced by Peter's grieving and remorse in Mark 14. We see redemptive influence emerge as Jesus interacts with Peter in John 21. Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter responds affirmatively. Jesus then exhorts Peter to "feed his sheep." Peter accepts this call to action and continues to faithfully expand the kingdom of God until his death. The same God who used

69. Powers, *Redemptive Leadership: Unleashing Your Greatest Influence* (Illumify Media Global, 2019), 16.

failure as a tool to mature Peter, Paul, John Mark, Elijah, and the Old Testament kings, is at work in the lives of today's leaders as well.

Summary

From our examination of scripture we discover that from the very beginning, humanity was to depend on God for leadership, guidance, and provision. For a period of time in the garden of Eden, this plan unfolded as designed. But then, man and woman failed to follow the commands set forth by God. Since then, humans have struggled with failure in various forms. This is witnessed through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, Old Testament leaders such as Saul, David, the kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms and Elijah, New Testament leaders such as John Mark, Paul, and Peter. Even so, studies of these figures yield the truth that God's purposes will be accomplished in spite of failure. Notwithstanding Adam and Eve's failure, they were fruitful and filled the earth and ruled over it. Even with the failures of numerous kings, God kept and is keeping his promise of a Davidic king who will have an everlasting throne and kingdom. And although men such as Elijah, John Mark, Paul, and Peter had personal failures, God used them in mighty ways to expand his kingdom. What then should be the response to failure?

The figures that we have studied reveal that a proper response to failure is repentance. As they repented, so too, are we to confront our own failures. The book of Amos instructs that when we are guilty of pandering to prosperity, hypocrisy, and the idolatry of self-love, we are to return to God.[70] Without a clear change in direction, there will be chastisement and punishments. The book of Hosea educates us on the qualities of repentance. Repentance requires humility,

70. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 671.

knowledge of the Lord, loyalty to him, justice towards the vulnerable, and dedication to the Torah.[71] These are the tenets of repentance. Jeremiah teaches us that a "new heart" provides the context of repentance.[72] Repentance is not lip service; it requires a change of heart. God cares about the condition of our heart. We should be contrite and brokenhearted when we disobey God. Psalm 51 implores:

> Have mercy on me, O God,
> according to your unfailing love;
> according to your great compassion
> blot out my transgressions.
> Wash away all my iniquity
> and cleanse me from my sin.
> For I know my transgressions,
> and my sin is always before me.
> Against you, you only, have I sinned
> and done what is evil in your sight;
> so you are right in your verdict
> and justified when you judge.
> Surely I was sinful at birth,
> sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
> Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
> you taught me wisdom in that secret place.
> Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
> wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
> Let me hear joy and gladness;
> let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
> Hide your face from my sins
> and blot out all my iniquity.
> Create in me a pure heart, O God,
> and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
> Do not cast me from your presence
> or take your Holy Spirit from me.
> Restore to me the joy of your salvation
> and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
> Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
> so that sinners will turn back to you.
> Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,

71. Freedman, 672.

72. Freedman, 672.

you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is[b] a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

God works powerfully in and through our weakness.[73] He uses all the events of our lives, both positive and negative, to forge in us a redemptive influence for his kingdom. When we understand, teach, and live out this transformative phenomena, we are best equipped to exert our greatest influence for the kingdom.

73. Harv Powers, *Redemptive Leadership: Unleashing Your Greatest Influence*, (Illumify Media Global, 2019), 14.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

God uses humanity, including their failures, to accomplish his purposes. This chapter will explore a range of management, psychological, and educational literature that engages the topic of failure. More specifically, this chapter will explore lessons harvested from literature on experiencing failure, processing failure, and moving forward from failure. Through this literature review, I aim to synthesize lessons learned from failure so that concepts gleaned may be made available to administrators to strengthen their leadership and that of independent school leaders.

Lessons on Experiencing Failure

An important work in describing the experience of failure is Colin Feltham's *Failure – The Art of Living*. Released in 2012, Feltham refers to failure as "success's ugly twin." He argues that failure is inevitable cognitively, biologically, and morally. It includes everything from the smallest of failures such as getting someone's name wrong, missing a train, missing a penalty in a football match, through habitual failures such as addictions, personal cognitive errors and common epistemological fallacies, to large-scale and even ruinous social, ecological and cosmic failures.[1] And as unpalatable as it may be, Feltham posits that "failure in one guise or another is pervasive, inescapable and has a great deal to teach us."[2]

Feltham's work affords readers a deep dive into many categories of failure. Feltham discusses a range of academic failure. For some, poor school performance reflects academic

1. Colin Feltham, *Failure*: *The Art of Living* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2014), 6.

2. Feltham, 2.

failure. For others with excellent grades, academic failure might look like not being accepted into one's school of choice. In the realm of religion, he argues that one might be unique and precious in the sight of God, but regarded as a "failure" if they do not accept the terms of the religion. Further, for those who do accept the terms of the religion, they may experience tremendous feelings of guilt and view themselves as hypocrites and "not good enough."[3]

Compared to the philosophical greats Socrates and Diogenes, most would be viewed as failures as well. We are not as sacrificial as those icons nor do we spurn material comforts. In the domain of psychotherapy, we would likely be considered double failures. We suffer from neurosis and pathologies. This is our first failure. And then, we go to therapy for long periods of time and still suffer from neurosis and pathologies. Hence, the double failure.[4]

In addition to describing failure, Feltham provides insight into how different genders may experience failure differently. Feltham documents that men are more often referred to as failures. This descriptor is most often used to describe men with shortcomings in the areas of commerce, sports, and other traditionally male domains. Conversely, women are more likely to describe themselves as failures in three categories: reproduction, mothering, and appearance.[5]

Is there a correlation between gender, feelings of failure, and suicide? Perhaps so. Studies have demonstrated that there is a higher prevalence of suicide by men than women. A February 2021 Washington, DC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) report revealed that in 2019, the suicide rate for males was 3.7 times higher (22.4. per 100,000) than that of females (6 per

3. Feltham, 104-105.

4. Feltham, 105.
5. Feltham, *Failure*, 111.

100,000).[6] The same study showed that the suicide rate was highest for males over 75 years of age. Conversely, the highest suicide rate for females was in the 45-64 age group. Could there be a correlation with older male feelings of failure (my career is over, did it make an impact, what is my legacy?) and suicide? Could there be a correlation with 45-64 year old female feelings of failure (I am no longer able to reproduce, my children are no longer at home, my appearance is on the decline?)? If there is a correlation, how might that impact how failure is researched, viewed, and discussed? Answers to these questions are important, particularly for school communities.

Scott Sandage's *Born Losers – A History of Failure in America*, also offers lessons on how gender may impact experiences with failure.[7] In this seminal work, Sandage surveys the lives of nominal men from the early 1800s and 1900s and their struggles. He highlights how select American values often become the measure of a man. Sandage also describes what constitutes a "born loser." Who is labeled a born loser in his book? The misfits of capitalism.

While Sandage focuses on a period over one hundred years ago, great similarities remain. In fact, he explains that the values that came to dominate the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries persist today. "Businessmen dominate this story because their loss of money and manhood drove legislative, commercial, and cultural solutions that redefined failure."[8] Sandage

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6. National Institute of Health. "Suicide Statistics." February 2021. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide

7. Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

8. Sandage, *Born Losers*, 4.

references Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber lays out the framework upon which the American Dream is built:

> The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. "It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action." These rules include the rational pursuit of profit, the perpetual increase of capital as an end in itself, the development of an acquisitive personality, and the belief that ceaseless work is a necessity of life.[9]

Men who were not able to prove themselves successful at the perpetual increase of capital often experienced a tragic end. Sandage writes, "American men started jumping out of windows long before the Great Crash. A hundred years earlier, in 1829, failed Bostonians reportedly 'preferred death, by their own hands, to a life of misery and disgrace.' In the panic of 1837, Emerson wrote in his journal, 'The land stinks with suicide.'[10] Having left the pulpit for literary pursuits, he confessed that he was 'glad it is not my duty to preach,' because he would not have known what to say. By 1841, the magazine *Arcturus* renamed the era of the self-made man: "Ours is the age of suicide and mysterious disappearance."[11]

It was heartbreaking then and remains heartbreaking now to consider that a man's financial status was the metrics by which failure or success was determined. How different might things have been if there was no sting of disgrace that accompanied failure? How different might things have been if there were more tools to manage the intense feelings that failure evokes?

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9. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2013).

10. Sandage, 6.

11. Sandage, *Born Losers*, 6.

Sandage's book on the history of failure in America sets the stage for the urgency of acquiring a broad understanding of not only the negatives that accompany failure, but more importantly, the positive transformative effect that it can have when properly managed.

Like the men that Sandage writes about, author, Feltham also describes his own personal experiences with failure. At the outset, Feltham is authentic:

> I have experienced depression and it's always there in the background, uncured by therapy. Like many people, however successful I may appear, I often feel a mere whisker away from failure. I have two divorces behind me and several "broken relationships." I became a professor quite late in the day, but in a subject that many regard as academically lightweight, and not the kind of high-status professor who brings in large sums of money for important research, sits on important committees and jet sets around the world. I became redundant about six months before starting this book and my pension is much more modest than that of most of my professional peers. My house is a small mid-terrace, my car is small and I can't really afford proper holidays. I often suffer from insomnia and am sometimes lonely. You could say that after some self-pity and adjustment at sixty, I have mostly come to accept all this. But my self-concept can shift from equanimity to a dark sense of failure. Maybe I can write quite well but can I sustain a very long-term relationship? I can write but I'm almost completely impractical. I can write but not as well as many others. And so on.[12]

Feltham's admissions open the door for readers to find themselves in the text. If Feltham can journey through failure, so too, can they. He points out that society is quick to label those who have failed "losers." Against that pressure, he reminds us that "each of us is in principle free to ignore conventional social markers of success and to define ourselves by our own subjective criteria regardless of outward achievements, but this is not easy, requiring resources of self-esteem and tough reasoning that not all possess."[13] This ignoring of conventional markers bears further reflection. Christian believers should keep before them the truth that we are not who the

12. Feltham, *Failure*, 6.

13. Feltham, 97.

worlds says we are. Instead, we are defined by our Maker. The One who made heaven and earth has created us in his image. We are the Imago Dei. This has the power to impact our daily living. We are not the sum of our successes and failures. We are image bearers of the King. When our identity is grounded in Christ, even in the midst of stress and strife, we can thrive. Nothing can increase or diminish our worth in the eyes of God. We are his beloved. This knowledge empowers us to advance, even in the face of failure.

Not all experiences with failure are negative. Barry Moltz's *Bounce! Failure, Resiliency, and Confidence to Achieve Your Next Great Success*, sheds light on the upside of failure.[14] In chapter six of his book, he describes how failure *is* an option. Interestingly, Moltz writes that "out of 100 people, 70 will want to start a business, 15 will actually do so in the next few years, and only five will succeed on the first try. In business, this makes failure far more common than success."[15] And while failure is more common than success, Moltz notes that we do not like to talk about it. He shares that we possess all sorts of language to shine a light on and emphasize success, but we come up short when it comes to failure. As a result, Moltz introduces readers to new vocabulary to describe failure.

"Failure is brassy, never shy. Failure is red, never yellow or green. Failure is a good teacher but a bad learner. Failure prefers dim light. Failure's favorite time of year is winter. Failure is like fire, a bruise, ice, and chili peppers."[16]

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14. Barry J. Moltz, *Bounce! Failure, Resiliency, and Confidence to Achieve Your Next Great Success* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 86.

15. Moltz, *Bounce*, 86.

16. Moltz, 86.

Laurence Weinzimmer continues this exploration of how experiences with failure are framed with a key question in his book, *The Wisdom of Failure – How to Learn the Tough Leadership Lessons Without Paying the Price*.[17] "Have you ever noticed that many successful leaders profiled in leadership books have failed when faced with challenging situations?"[18] He then describes the story of Ken Lay and many others and the leadership lessons that we can learn from their failures.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Lay was the darling of the business world and well regarded by his peers and staff. He was successful and generous. He had worked his way to the top through hard work and education. He rose to riches from poverty and seemed to have the Midas touch as CEO of Enron. In 2001, Lay became aware of unethical financial behavior by his top leaders. They were hiding failed business dealings that had resulted in billions of dollars of debt. Lay found himself in a dilemma with two choices before him. Lay could "admit the mistakes, move on, and try to learn from them in order to improve performance on future ventures; or hide the mistakes and look the other way. He chose the latter path - the way that meant he would not have to admit failure. Subsequently, Lay not only approved the unethical actions of his leaders, but he also refused to know the details. Not only did Lay fail to learn from his mistakes and the mistakes of others, but he also misled the Enron board of directors by using

17. Laurence G. Weinzimmer and Jim McConoughey, *The Wisdom of Failure: How to Learn the Tough Leadership Lessons Without Paying the Price* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

18. Gail Blanke, *Between Trapezes: Flying into a New Life with the Greatest of Ease* (Rodale Books, 2004); Feltham, *Failure*; Moltz, *Bounce;* Weinzimmer, *Wisdom of Failure*.

misrepresented earnings and falsified financial statements to show inflated performance. Ultimately, the company went bankrupt, bilking shareholders of $11 billion."[19]

Lay's fall from grace was steep and immediate. The company name "Enron" became a fiasco synonymous with scandal and failure. Lay's leadership style was recharacterized as dishonest, disgraceful, and humiliating. The man whose company had once been named Best Company to Work For from 1991 to 2001 by *Fortune,*[20] was found guilty on six counts of fraud and conspiracy and four counts of bank fraud.[21] Three months before his sentencing, Lay suffered a heart attack and passed away in July 2006. One cannot help but wonder how things might have been different if Lay had admitted and disclosed his senior leaders' unscrupulous behavior when it was first discovered.

Jim Owens, former CEO of Caterpillar, Inc. was a contemporary of Ken Lay. They had similar backgrounds but ultimately made very different leadership choices during challenging times. Owens kept a keen eye on his environment. "The attention he paid to mistakes made by others in the 1980s created the foundation for his strategies during the 2008 to 2011 world recession. Strategies that proved remarkably successful and put Caterpillar in a select group of companies that were celebrated by Wall Street as weathering the recession relatively

19. Weinzimmer, *Wisdom of Failure*, 3.

20. Weinzimmer, 2.

21. New York Times. "Enron CEO Scandal." February 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/22/business/enron-ceo-skilling-scandal.html#:~:text=Lay%20was%20found%20guilty%20on,and%20his%20conviction%20was%20vacated.&text=A%20judge%20reduced%20his%20initial,Skilling%20and%20Mr.

unscathed."[22] Owens knew the value of learning from mistakes. Even better, he learned from the mistakes of others.

A.G. Lafley, former CEO of Proctor & Gamble is another leader who recognized the value of failure. An interview between Lafley and the *Harvard Business Review* went like this: "Can leaders learn as much from success [as they can from failure]? His response was, of course, 'No.' He went on to say: 'My experience is that we learn much more from failure than we do from success. Look at great politicians and successful sports teams. Their biggest lessons come from their toughest losses. The same is true for any kind of leader. And it was certainly true for me.'[23] Lafley refers to his failures as 'gifts,' because they have given him tremendous growth opportunities as a leader."[24]

Building on this premise, Weinzimmer offers that real failure does not come from making mistakes. Rather, real failure is characterized by avoiding failure at all costs. This does not mean that one should approach all of their affairs with reckless abandon. Instead, one might consider taking calculated, healthy risks. Weinzimmer continues to extract and cultivate understanding of this subject. If failure is such a magnificent catalyst to success, why do we avoid it above all else? Weinzimmer gives three reasons. We avoid failure because of the performance review trap, a culture of perfectionism, and losing balance between "what" and "how."[25]

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22. Weinzimmer, *Wisdom of Failure,* 6.

23. Harvard Business Review. "I Think of My Failures as a Gift." April 2011, https://hbr.org/2011/04/i-think-of-my-failures-as-a-gift

24. Weinzimmer, 8.

25. Weinzimmer, *Wisdom of Failure*, 9-10.

In summary, there are many lessons to be harvested from experiencing failure. These lessons inform us that failure is common and inevitable cognitively, biologically, and morally. These lessons also teach us that different genders may experience failure differently. Further, we understand that some individuals experience failure and seek to hide that reality at all costs. Other individuals openly embrace the experience of failure and view it as a learning tool.

Lessons on Processing Failure

In addition to lessons on experiencing failure, there are also lessons to be harvested on processing failure. According to Guy Winch, children know how to treat common, minor ailments. They are taught basic first aid skills at a young age and they retain knowledge of those skills well into adulthood. But if you ask the same children, now adults, how to treat the pain of rejection, loneliness, or failure, they might be at a loss for how to tend to those psychological injuries. Winch builds a case for households constructing a "medicine cabinet" for the common psychological injuries of everyday life. He writes that, "applying emotional first aid to such injuries can prevent many of them from affecting our mental health and emotional well-being going forward. Indeed, many of the diagnosable psychological conditions for which we seek professional treatment could be prevented if we applied emotional first aid to our wounds when we first sustained them."[26] Winch is equally clear to point out that when the psychological injury is serious, a medicine cabinet approach is not appropriate. One should seek the services of a mental health professional. He adds this note: "Because this book represents a psychological medicine cabinet and is by no means intended to function as a substitute for medical or

26. Guy Winch, *Emotional First Aid: Practical Strategies for Treating Failure, Rejection, Guilt, and Other Everyday Psychological Injuries* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2013), 11.

psychological care by a trained professional, I end each chapter with guidelines for when readers should consult a trained mental health specialist. The suggestions in this book are based on top-notch scientific studies that have been subjected to peer review procedures and published in first-rate academic journals. References for each of the studies and treatments can be found in the endnotes."[27] With this framework in mind, Winch devotes attention to these skills in *Emotional First Aid - Practical Strategies for Treating Failure, Rejection, Guilt, and Other Everyday Psychological Injuries*.

Winch begins his book with a personal account:

> During my years studying clinical psychology in graduate school I was frequently criticized for giving my patients specific and concrete suggestions for how they might alleviate their emotional pains. "We're here to do deep psychological work," one supervisor used to admonish me, "not to dispense psychological aspirin - it doesn't exist!"
>
> But offering immediate relief and doing deep psychological work are not mutually exclusive. I believe everyone should have access to emotional first aid treatments, just as they should any other treatments for dressing emotional wounds. Over the years, I've made it a practice to distill innovative research findings into practical suggestions, treatments my patients can apply to the emotional hurts of daily living. I've done so for one main reason - they work. For some years now, my patients, friends, and family members have been urging me to collect these emotional first aid treatments into a book. I decided to do so because it's time we took our mental health more seriously. It's time we practiced mental health hygiene just as we do dental and physical hygiene. It's time we all owned a psychological medicine cabinet with the emotional equivalents of bandages, antibacterial ointments, ice packs, and fever suppressants. After all, once we know psychological aspirins do exist, we'd be foolish not to use them.[28]

Chapter six describes how emotional chest colds may become psychological pneumonia. In this chapter, Winch likens failure to a chest cold. Colds are common. When we get one, we

27. Winch, *Treating Failure*, 11.
28. Winch, *Treating Failure*, 9-10.

normally modify our behavior by resting and drinking plenty of fluids. If we do not modify our behavior, our cold can progress into something worse like pneumonia. Similarly, when we encounter failure, if we do not modify our activities, it can progress into something worse. Winch writes that "failure inflicts three specific psychological wounds that require emotional first aid. It damages our self-esteem by inducing us to draw conclusions about our skills, abilities, and capacities that are highly inaccurate and distorted. It saps our confidence, motivation, and optimism, making us feel helpless and trapped. And it can trigger unconscious stresses and fears that lead us to inadvertently sabotage our future efforts."[29]

Winch offers four treatments to counter the psychological wounds that failure inflicts. The first treatment is getting support. Getting support involves surrounding ourselves with warm emotional support. It also includes finding the positive lessons that have resulted from the failure. Combined, these two elements: emotional support and positive lessons, help to treat the negative effects of failure to our self-esteem. Winch also encourages readers to engage in a writing exercise. The writing exercise involves answering six distinct questions. What should you do differently next time? What opportunities might failure possibly present? In what ways might your failure make you stronger? In what ways could you view your failure as a success? How much more will success mean to you now that you've encountered failure? Can you identify ways in which you derived meaning and satisfaction as you pursued your goal? Winch concludes that applying the aforementioned treatment is effective for minimizing damage to confidence, self-esteem, and motivation.[30]

29. Winch, 125.
30. Winch, *Treating Failure*, 140-141.

The second treatment for combating the effects of failure is regaining control. This involves focusing on factors in your control. Winch recommends goal setting to fight against feeling trapped, incapacitated, and helpless. Only one goal should be undertaken at a time. To begin, one should define their goal in realistic and specific terms. Next, the goal should be broken down into intermediate steps. Third, a time frame should be set for overall and intermediate goals. Fourth, list any potential detours, setbacks, or temptations that might arise. Fifth, list the possible solutions for each of the above detours, setbacks, or temptations, including what you can do to avoid them and how you plan to implement these solutions. Phrase your implementation strategies as positive actions. Winch concludes that this process of goal setting is effective for preventing or reducing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, increasing hope and motivation, and improving chances of future success.[31]

The third treatment for countering the psychological wounds that failure inflicts is taking responsibility and owning the fear. Winch reminds readers that although it is tempting to make excuses about our failure, doing so prevents us from learning the many useful lessons it can teach us. Winch writes, "The best way for us to own both our feelings and our failures is to talk about them with supportive people. Airing our fears and exposing them to trusted friends or family members will minimize our unconscious need to express them self destructively. Another option is to write about our fears in a journal or blog, as long as we make sure to balance them with more optimistic assessments."[32] Adding humor into the mix is healing as well. Ultimately, when we are able to laugh and make jokes, in an appropriate manner, about our failure, it removes the sting. Applying this treatment is useful for preventing or minimizing damage to

31. Winch, 142-147.
32. Winch, *Treating Failure*, 148.

confidence and self-esteem and taking the sting out of painful failures by finding humor in them.[33]

The fourth and final treatment that Winch suggests for countering the psychological wounds that failure inflicts is managing performance pressure. Ironically, Winch calls readers to distract themselves from distractions. One concrete way to relieve performance pressure is to whistle. If you are by yourself, one should feel free to whistle as loudly as they desire. If surrounded by others, Winch recommends whistling very softly. The act of whistling, not the volume, has proven extremely successful in mitigating performance pressure. To alleviate test anxiety, Winch recommends taking one minute during the exam for mindful breathing. He also counsels anxious test takers to quietly vocalize the test questions and reason through the answers aloud. He states that this process demands just enough attentional energy to deprive the part of our brain that wants to focus on worrying.[34] The last strategy that Winch describes to reduce performance anxiety is neutralizing the stereotype. To diminish stereotype threat, Winch recommends taking time before a test or project to write a brief essay about an aspect of your character that you value highly and about which you feel confident and proud. Altogether, these treatments have been demonstrated to reduce performance pressure, test anxiety, stereotype threat and risk of "choking."[35]

Winch concludes this chapter with advice on when to consult a mental health professional.

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33. Winch, 149.

34. Winch, 151.

35. Winch, *Treating Failure*, 152.

> Treating the psychological wounds failure inflicts should bring you emotional relief, foster your future preparation and performance, and allow you to persist in making efforts towards your goals. However, if you've applied the treatments in this chapter and still struggle with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, shame, or depression, you should seek the help of a mental health professional. You should also seek professional help if these treatments have not helped you lower performance pressure or if you continue to fail at tasks at which you should be succeeding. Finally, if your mood and outlook have become so bleak and despondent that you have thoughts of harming yourself or others, please seek immediate help from a mental health professional or go to your local emergency room.[36]

In addition to Winch's practical advice on processing failure, Barry Moltz teaches us that embracing failure in a new way is quite important. Instead of words such as botch, bust, decay, deadbeat, derelict, deficiency, dud, fiasco, good for nothing, loafer, moocher, nobody, sinking ship, washout, and wreck, Moltz suggests something neutral. Learning to call failure something neutral, like "decision point, outcome, or result" helps to process failure and develop "bounce."[37]

Moltz also examines the relationship between failure and fear. He derides companies that have made a fortune selling a "no fear" mindset. He says that we do not advance by denying fear. Instead, we should learn to accept it and make it work for us. Moltz shares the experience of Harry Cutler in Queenstown, New Zealand. Cutler's business is bungee jumping. People pay over one hundred dollars to bungee jump 150 meters over a canyon. Over the years, Cutler has witnessed many people attempt to back out at the last minute. In those moments, he carefully observes their body language to determine whether or not he will attempt to coach them into going through with their jump. Many rally and take the plunge. For those that back out, almost none return to conquer their fear. The most fascinating detail of all? Cutler himself is terrified of jumping. Despite over 300 personal jumps and assisting over 10,000 people jump, he has never

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36. Winch, 152.

37. Moltz, *Bounce*, 86-87.

conquered the fear.[38] Each time, he is petrified. Despite his own personal fear, Cutler has managed to make a career out of bungee jumping. Cutler accepted his fear and made it work for him. What lessons can we learn from this relationship between fear and failure? When we accept failure as inevitable, fear begins to lose its hold and we are able to move forward in our purpose.

Imagery is powerful. Moltz gives readers a solid tool to add to their box when he describes "teaching butterflies to fly in formation." He references that uncomfortable feeling that nearly everyone can relate to: butterflies in the stomach. But instead of suppressing the impending feeling of failure that the butterflies represent, Moltz encourages readers to harness that phenomena for good. He teaches that the butterflies actually do some positive things. They increase energy levels, heighten senses, and make a frightening repeat experience feel new all over again.[39] He urges readers to channel these feelings to their advantage. As they practice this skill, they will acquire the confidence that comes with effort and experience. Combining the butterflies, effort, and experience is what leads to "flying in formation." We discover that fear can actually be a catalyst to success.

Moltz also offers concrete strategies to help overcome fear that can lead to failure. He shares that he is afraid of flying. This fear has the potential to paralyze him and keep him from traveling to speaking engagements. Failure to show up at a gig would be catastrophic for his career, which brings him great happiness. So, what does Moltz do? He listens to high energy music while flying. The music distracts him from the turbulence and allows him to successfully reach his destination without freaking out over the turbulence.

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38. Moltz, *Bounce*, 95.

39. Moltz, 97.

After making a case for the connection between fear and failure, Moltz adds in "choice." Sometimes when we fail, we are miserable because it seems as if we are powerless. So often, this is simply not true. We often have a choice to keep doing something, and risk failure, or to stop altogether. "Stopping is many times the more difficult choice. Choice is an antidote to fear. It doesn't get rid of it, but it allows us to live with it."[40] This is a lesson worth holding on to. Taking action or stopping an action is a conscious choice. That conscious choice can help us to break free from a crippling cycle that results in failure. At this point, Moltz sprinkles in a bit of humor and shares a quote from this lawyer. "As my attorney, Zane Smith, always told me when things were going badly for me, 'Remember, the worst they can do is eat you, and that is illegal.'"

Thus far, Moltz has given strategies for tackling fear head on in the hopes of avoiding failure. But how can one process failure when it happens? Moltz suggests grieving. "Grieving is okay, even necessary — failure is, after all, a kind of loss. Pause to feel it. Beat yourself up; cry and wallow. Declare all woe to you if this makes you feel better. Feel whatever you need to feel, and then get past it."[41] This is sound advice. Ignoring or stuffing down failure can be detrimental in the long run. However, being in touch with the full range of emotions that accompany failure can allow one to better process the experience. Moltz notes that it is important not to dwell on the feelings of grief too long.

40. Moltz, *Bounce*, 99.

41. Moltz, 109.

Feltham also discusses the profound importance of making peace with failure. He borrows from the work of Albert Ellis. In Ellis's *The Myth of Self-Esteem,*[42] he shares the message that if we want a reasonably happy life we had better learn to accept ourselves with all our failings. He uses the term "unconditional self-acceptance."[43] Interestingly, Ellis teaches that self-acceptance and anti-perfectionism are pathways to better mental and health and happiness.[44]

The path to better mental health and happiness is filled with warfare. As Feltham explains, even the most successful people often feel like failures. While uncomfortable, this constant onslaught of self-doubt should come as no surprise. Scripture reminds us that spiritual warfare is a constant reality. Fortunately, we are not without weapons. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, allows us to combat the lies of the enemy. Through Christ, we are more than conquerors and there is no failure that is insurmountable.

In summary, there are many lessons to be harvested on processing failure. These lessons include practical guidance on how to apply "emotional first-aid." Getting support, regaining control, taking responsibility, owning the fear, and managing performance pressure are key steps to processing failure. Embracing vocabulary that positions failure as neutral, harnessing the power of imagery, grieving when failure occurs, and unconditional self-acceptance are also helpful tools.

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42. Albert Ellis, *The Myth of Self-esteem: How Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy Can Change Your Life Forever* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. 2005).

43. Feltham, *Failure*, 106.

44. Ellis, *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*.

Lessons on Moving Forward from Failure

In addition to lessons on experiencing and processing failure, there are also lessons to be harvested on moving forward from failure. Kevin Turner of Modelmetrics further describes this journey. "When we experience failure, we need to let the body 'metabolize and pass it.' With this imagery we can visualize what it is like for the body to first wallow and absorb the failure and then eventually move on to another place. When we act in an honest and forthright manner with maximum effort, whatever shame or grief we feel can be temporary. The key is to accept failure without shame, so that we can learn humility from either failure or success."[45] The acceptance of failure without shame is a major lesson to be learned on this topic. A neutral attitude towards failure can be one of the best lessons taught to students and staff by teachers and supervisors.

While a neutral attitude towards failure is an important lesson to learn, it is not intuitive. Often, we struggle to talk about failure. We tend to hide it and downplay it. How then can we begin to "flex the muscles" of developing a neutral attitude towards it? Gail Blanke, author of *Between Trapezes*, writes about "editing skills."[46] In fact, she highlights that the most important thing that she has learned is how to be a great opinion editor in her own life. She writes, "You have to edit out not only those voices, but also the stuff that didn't work. Trapeze artists have a saying, 'The greatest fliers are the greatest fallers.' Trapeze artists never confuse falling with failing. You've got people that just keep reinventing themselves, what they do, and reinventing the way they do it, and we believe in them. If you can figure out in your own profession how not

45. Moltz, *Bounce*, 109.

46. Gail Blanke, *Between Trapezes: Flying into a New Life with the Greatest of Ease* (Rodale Books, 2004).

to confuse falling with failing, you won't feel shame, you will achieve true confidence."[47] It is important to keep the main thing, the main thing. Moltz encourages readers to adopt this mantra: "I am not my business. I am not my business. A failed business or failed event does not make me a failure."[48]

After acknowledging failure, harnessing the power of fear, and pausing to grieve, Moltz encouragers readers to give up the shame. "When you fail, feel shame if you must, and if you need to, grieve. Deflect the shame that others cast upon you. Ideally, never feel shame if you acted in a rightful manner. Shame only gets in the way since it has a tendency to stick to us and everything around us. Shame only strengthens the ego to act. It does not provide the basis for a healthy balance of humility. Let the shame fade so you can move on to whatever comes next."[49] Again, readers are encouraged to fully experience a range of emotions, including shame, and then move on. The key here is the moving on. Moltz and the authors with whom he engages discuss the significance of pace. They argue that moving too slowly is nearly always detrimental in business. As the cliché states, "the show must go on." Every effort must be made to move forward, not wallowing in guilt and shame. Naturally, this is easier said than done. But paired with tools from Feltham, such as USA (unconditional self-acceptance), we become better skilled at quickly processing our emotions and journeying forward.

As leaders, others are watching us. What we model for our students, colleagues, and staff matters. Kara Trott, president of Quantum Health Corporation, provides guidance on how to publicly manage failure. "The way the owner reacts to failure sets a tone for the entire company.

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47. Moltz, *Bounce*, 109.

48. Moltz, 110.

49. Moltz, 111.

Start with picking yourself up, dusting yourself off, say, 'Oh well,' and move on. Be an adult; get over it. You have to ask yourself, 'What did I learn?' Just move on, very quickly — like, in a day. You can't wallow, you have to come back and lead your organization. Maybe something good came out of it, maybe not, but move forward either way. Your emotions influence how others react, so move on so everyone else will too."[50] This is practical advice that makes sense on many levels. It is true for business and it is true for households and classrooms. Parents are often taught that children will emulate their responses. Similarly, students will also often rise to the level of expectation set for them. The message: model how to process failure. Train those around you to acknowledge it, feel it, learn from it, and move on.

Educators offer incredible insight into the value of risk taking. In her *Edutopia: A Classroom Full of Risk Takers* article, Leticia Guzman Ingram pulls back the curtain to the classroom and offers lessons on teaching students how to risk failure on the path to success. To accomplish this, Guzman interviews several teachers who were bestowed state teacher of the year awards. From these expert teachers, Ingram gathers five lessons worth repeating.

Jean Russell, an elementary teacher from Indiana offers the first lesson: celebrate perseverance. To make this lesson visible, Russell has a marble jar in her classroom. Each time a student takes a risk and demonstrates perseverance, a marble goes into the jar. When the jar is full, the class has a perseverance party.[51]

In Arizona, Christine Porter Marsh provides our second lesson. Marsh models sharing mistakes. "I'll say, 'You were right. I was wrong.'" She also tells her classes that it's

50. Moltz, *Bounce*, 115.

51. Leticia Ingram, *"A Classroom Full of Risk Takers."* September 2017. https://www.edutopia.org/article/classroom-full-risk-takers.

OK to be wrong during discussions: “I’d rather have you contribute and be wrong than not contribute.”[52] When educators model that learning happens from mistakes, they are freeing their students up to take risks as well.

The third lesson gleaned from our group of teachers is allowing retakes. “To encourage thinking and exploring ideas, Ernie Lee of Georgia says he allows retakes of assignments and tests. ‘The grade is important, but the main goal is for them to be able to think and to know the material.’ And he makes sure that whether students agree or disagree with him, they back up their comments with well-thought-out ideas to support their answers.”[53] This lesson encourages critical thinking skills as well as healthy risk taking.

Natalie DiFusco-Funk of Virginia teaches her students our fourth lesson: “the power of yet.”[54] What does this mean? The “power of yet” offers us hope and something to strive towards. Just because we cannot presently do something does not mean that we will never acquire the skill or understanding. It simply means that we have not “yet” done so. Through continued practice and learning, we may reach our goal.

Our fifth and final lesson is from Diane McKee of Florida. “Each Friday, McKee shows movie clips of famous people like Michael Jordan or Oprah Winfrey

52. Ingram, *Risk Takers.*

53. Ingram, *Risk Takers.*

54. Ingram, *Risk Takers.*

sharing stories about how they experienced failure before going on to succeed. It's one of her students' favorite activities."[55]

Altogether, these lessons offer leaders some concrete ways to encourage risk taking. Developing these skills does not come naturally. It is not intuitive. However, it is possible. Teaching our students and staff that we supervise how to risk failure by taking healthy risks is one of the best investments we can make in those we lead. When failure does occur, each of these skills becomes a formidable tool in moving forward from failure.

Harv Powers brings together the wisdom of the collective body of literature reviewed in this chapter.[56] His redemptive leadership model offers lessons on experiencing failure, processing failure, and moving forward from failure. He provides insight into how failure can be a catalyst for positive, transformative leadership development. In his work, Powers provides a model for redemptive leadership. Along the way, he tells the moving story of a Doctor of Ministry student named Bob.

Bob was a student of Dr. Powers in one of his earliest redemptive leadership tracks. He was in his sixties and was slated to give a presentation to the class. The presentation was intended to convey to the class pivotal life and leadership moments in the life of the student. It was designed to foster connection amongst the students and their professors as well as to explore where each student was in the redemptive leadership model.

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55. Ingram, *Risk Takers.*

56. Powers, *Redemptive Leadership.*

Bob shared that he grew up in poverty in New England. His family's situation took a significant turn for the worse when his father abandoned the family. Their home became food insecure. Despite working hard to provide for her family, his mother could not meet the basic needs of her children. In despair, she relinquished her parental rights and left her children in the care of an orphanage. Bob found himself confused and alone. An orphanage kitchen staff member took an interest in him. The staff member taught him culinary skills and Bob found his footing with a mentor by his side. After a couple of years, the mentor began to sexually abuse Bob. Feeling like he had nowhere to turn, the abuse continued until Bob left the orphanage at eighteen. Bob entered the military. There, he found a trustworthy mentor in a chaplain. The chaplain ignited within Bob a desire to attend seminary.[57]

At the end of Bob's first semester in seminary, he was dismissed. He was told that he did not have what it took to be a successful seminary student or minister. Bob was devastated. He left the seminary. He found what some might consider difficult and "lesser" ministry positions. Working hard, Bob continued to minister while attending college and managed to earn a bachelor's degree. At this point in his story to the class, Bob shared, "Dr. Cooper and Dr. Powers, I have been living with a great fear since arriving for this two-week intensive. The doctoral program requires a Master of Divinity as a prerequisite for admission. I never completed that degree. I've been waiting for one of you to tell me I don't belong and ask me to leave!"[58] To Bob, it seemed that history was repeating itself. His previous attempt at seminary was cut short by someone who deemed him unqualified. This time around, Bob felt it would be the same.

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57. Powers, *Redemptive Leadership,* 149.

58. Powers, *Redemptive Leadership*, 149.

Incredibly, his professor responded, "Bob, the MDiv requirement has been waived due to your age and outstanding service to New England churches."[59]

Upon hearing those words, Bob wept. His professors wept. His classmates wept. Bob was going to be able to finish what he had started decades prior. All of Bob's life experiences redemptively brought him to that moment. God used Bob because of his crises, brokenness, and deep humility, not in spite of them. David Whyte's words were coming to fruition. "Sometimes with the bones of the black sticks left when the fire has gone out, someone has written something new in the ashes of your life."[60] This pivotal moment in the classroom served as a portal to deepen Bob's leadership.

In that classroom and in his book, Powers teaches readers the essential foundations of the redemptive leadership model. The first principle of the model is that leadership is a developmental process that occurs over the life span of the leader. The model also highlights that pivotal transformation windows occur in the "crucible" experiences of our lives. These crucible experiences include failure. Next, Powers explains that counterintuitively, the crisis of this revelation opens a portal to an inward journey of transformation. Redemptive influence emerges as the leader discovers that deeper humility establishes a greater foundation of trust and the authority to speak into others' lives. Finally, the ability to recognize the deeper redemptive narrative in others' lives allows the leader to support and guide individuals at key inflection points. Powers emphasizes that the redemptive leadership model is both linear and cyclic in nature. And it must be understood as a framework, mindset, and value system.[61] Through the

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59. Powers, 150.

60. Powers, 144.

61. Powers, *Redemptive Leadership,* 150-152.

model, leaders progress from “doing” to “being.” Likewise they move from “tasks” and “accomplishments” to “purpose” and “meaning.” Along the way, competency, intelligence, character, and transformation are built to a redemptive pinnacle. Powers ends his seminal work honoring the life and ministry of Dr. Vernon Grounds. While Powers never personally met him, many people who greatly impacted his life, benefitted from Dr. Grounds ministry. In fact, Powers elevates Grounds as a redemptive leader. ”Dr. Grounds clearly left a legacy of redemptive influence by engaging others at critical moments. Like Barnabas, I don't know the shaping events in Dr. Grounds life that created his sensitivity to others, but I am confident it arose from his own life journey.”[62]

In summary, there are many lessons to be harvested on moving forward from failure. These lessons highlight the importance of allowing the body to absorb the failure, wallow in it, and then, ultimately, to pass it. When this happens, we are able to accept failure without shame and move forward with power and determination. We are also able to model this moving forward from failure for others. Moving forward from failure often involves people reinventing themselves, what they do, and reinventing the way they do it. It involves keeping the main thing, the main thing. Individuals moving forward from failure cultivate habits such as perseverance, learning from mistakes, and allowing retakes. They also employ the redemptive leadership model as a framework, mindset, and value system.

Summary

God uses humanity, including their failures, to accomplish his purposes. Through a review of management, psychological, and educational literature, we are able to harvest and

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62. Powers, 153-155.

synthesize lessons on experiencing, processing, and moving forward from failure. These lessons offer tools to managers and school administrators to strengthen their leadership. This expanded toolkit allows us to recognize failure and its impact. It also offers a framework for managing the psychological wounds that accompany failure. After applying emotional first aid, we are better equipped to experience personal growth and to support the leaders under our influence as they take risks and encounter failure in their own lives. Ultimately, this reconciliation allows us to be redemptive leaders who use all of our experiences for the greatest possible kingdom impact.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

"Failure to Fruition: Harvesting Leadership Lessons" was a project with three main elements: selecting questions, selecting parameters, and selecting participants.

Project Overview

Having established the prevalence of failure in humanity, this project seeks to identify its potentially positive transformative effect on leadership development. To explore this potential impact, I interviewed a wide pool of leaders at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school to determine if those leaders had personally experienced such a leadership transformation. In chapter five, I will synthesize and analyze the results of the interviews as well as lessons gleaned from key biblical figures. Ultimately, I will share these results with Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the specific independent school as a resource for examining the effects of failure on leadership and how this might inform their teaching on the subject with their respective students and colleagues.

Part One: Selecting Questions

As a result of my master's and doctoral coursework in redemptive leadership, I knew that I wanted to better understand the potentially positive transformational impact that failure could have on leadership. What evidence source would I use to research this topic? Six potential sources were: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts.[1] Understanding that narrative accounts offer powerful

1. Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 103.

examples of such transformative moments, I determined that I would conduct a series of interviews on failure for my thesis-project.

Interviews are strong research tools for two primary reasons. They are targeted – focused on a particular topic and they are insightful.[2] Interviews provide explanations as well as personal views.[3] They occur in a variety of forms. Some interviews are "prolonged interviews" and take place over two or more hours.[4] These interviews may occur in one sitting or over a range of dates. Other interviews are "shorter interviews" and occur over an hour or so.[5] Finally, some interviews are "survey interviews." Survey interviews typically use a structured questionnaire.[6]

Due to the demanding schedules of my research participants, I determined that thirty-minute interviews would be most appropriate for my research. As a preschool to grade twelve educator myself, I wanted to explore the impact of failure on the leadership of current school administrators. Thus, my interview candidates would be selected from such a pool of administrators at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school.

Once I established that I would be conducting interviews, I needed to determine how the interview time would best be spent. Accordingly, during my second residency, I met with my professor and reader, Dr. Robert Mayer. We began our time by discussing the origins of my desire to interview school administrators on the topic of failure. Dr. Mayer offered advice on the

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2. Yin, *Case Study Research*, 106.

3. Yin, 106.

4. Yin, 110.

5. Yin, 111.

6. Yin, 112.

overall thesis-project and what each specific chapter should include. We then moved on to specific details related to the interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the project, he wondered, "would I be able to find school administrators willing to be interviewed?" I wondered, how many administrators should I interview? What would I ask them? Before offering his own thoughts on interview questions, Dr. Mayer wanted to hear what questions I was contemplating.

At the outset, I thought that it would be a good idea to hear how each interviewee would personally describe failure. Therefore, I suggested, "How would you describe failure?" as my first question. Next, I considered getting to the heart of my research by asking, "Have you ever had an experience with failure that ultimately strengthened your leadership?"

Dr. Mayer encouraged these initial questions and added that I might consider expanding my second question to include, "If so, would you please describe the experience and its impact on your leadership?" As we continued our dialogue, a third question emerged, "Have you ever observed someone else's leadership grow after an experience with failure? If so, would you please share that observation with me?"

At this point, I was well grounded with three questions. Nearing the end of our conversation together, a fourth and final question emerged. "Maybe you've observed a situation involving failure where the person did not grow. What did you observe about the impact on that individual?"

Each interviewee would be asked the same four questions. While these four questions would serve as the basis for each interview, follow-up questions that naturally emerged would be permitted. Dr. Mayer stressed the importance of putting each interviewee at ease. Based upon decades of conducting interviews, Dr. Mayer encouraged me to foster a "conversation among friends" atmosphere for my interviews. We also worked together to write out a lead into each

interview. I would open the interview by stating, “People don't like to talk about failure. We tend to gravitate towards success. But what if the most valuable lessons that we could learn about life, both professionally, and personally, could be learned from failure?”

Part Two: Selecting Parameters

After formulating my interview questions, I selected parameters that I would consider in selecting interview participants. The range of parameters that were considered are as follows: age, education, ethnicity, gender, languages spoken, marital status, nationality, occupation, parental status, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Due to the social proximity of the interviewer to the interviewees, a desire to protect the anonymity of those interviewed, and to foster the most candid responses, interviewees were not asked to complete a demographic survey. However, utilizing demographic information collected from other areas of the school as well as publicly shared data, a broad spectrum of diversity was achieved in the interviewee pool.

Part Three: Selecting Participants

In an earlier planning session with my mentor, we determined that the optimal number of interviews for this thesis-project was six to ten. Utilizing the parameters stated above, a broadly diverse pool of school administrators was identified for research interviews. Acknowledging the personal nature of the interviews, I approached each prospect in person to ask if they would be willing to interviewed.

Recalling Dr. Mayer’s advice to approach the interviews as “a conversation between friends,” I started each “interview ask” by sharing an update on my doctoral studies. I communicated my particular track, redemptive leadership, and shared a bit about the program. In turn, each interview prospect expressed support and encouragement for my academic endeavors.

Next in the conversation, I shared that the subject of my thesis-project was “failure” and its potentially positive transformative impact on leadership. I conveyed that I would be interviewing six to ten school administrators on the topic and that I would love for them to consider being one of my interviewees. For a number of these “asks” I had a printed copy of the interview questions on hand. In those instances, I read the questions aloud and then handed the prospective interviewee a copy to keep. For the prospects that I encountered without the printed copy in hand, I offered a verbal paraphrase of the questions with a promise to send the questions via email.

Initially, I asked ten school administrators if they would be willing to be interviewed. On the spot, nine answered, “yes.” One of the ten school administrators asked for time to consider my request. I responded, “absolutely!” In that moment, I sensed that school administrator was not comfortable discussing failure. One phone call and two email exchanges later, my initial sentiment was confirmed. The school administrator who initially expressed hesitance, ultimately declined to be interviewed. The formal response read, “I do feel torn. I want to support your thesis and want to hold my examples more privately. I would feel more comfortable if you ask others. If you need me, I will do the interview.” Respecting the response, I asked another excellent candidate to be my tenth interviewee.

After confirming my interviewees, I set about scheduling the interviews. As school administrators, this was quite a busy group. Some interview scheduling required working through an assistant. Other school administrators worked directly with me to schedule a time. Collectively, the interviews were scheduled over a two-week timeframe. Each interview was scheduled within a thirty-minute time slot. Interview times ranged from late morning to late afternoon.

At the beginning of each session, consent was obtained for the interview as well as the recording of the interview. Participants were informed that their actual names, along with the name of their school, would not be mentioned in the project. Further, no one, outside of myself, would have access to the recordings. Participants were informed that pseudonyms might be used.

Intentionally, and altogether, the school administrators interviewed represented diversity across a broad spectrum. Regarding age, the interviewees ranged from the thirties to sixties. The highest age concentration was in the fifties. In the category of education, all interviewees possessed at minimum a bachelor's degree. The highest educational attainment of the group ranged from undergraduate to doctoral degrees. The highest concentration of educational attainment was a master's level degree.

Additionally, there was a range of racial and ethnic diversity. The group was comprised of Asian, Black, Latino, and White administrators. The group included first-generation, second-generation, and multi-generation Americans as well as those with an international background. Jointly, the school administrators possessed fluency in multiple languages.

Within the group of ten administrators, five identified as women and five identified as men. Two administrators were single and eight administrators were married. Regarding parental status, eight of the administrators identified as parents. The sexual orientation of the group includes gay and heterosexual administrators.

The range of religion amongst the interviewee pool includes those with atheist, Christian, and Jewish backgrounds as well as those with no religious declaration. The senior positions held amidst the group include academic, admission, advancement, department, diversity, division, and research leaders. As senior school leaders, this group represents the highest wage earners of the institution.

Summary

In summary, ten research interviews were conducted on the topic of failure. The interviews took place at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school. The interviewees included senior school leaders in the academic, admission, advancement, department, diversity, division, and research realms. Amongst the administrators, there was diversity across a range of parameters that included age, education, ethnicity, gender, languages spoken, marital status, nationality, occupation, parental status, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Each interviewee was asked the following questions: How would you describe failure? Have you ever had an experience with failure that ultimately strengthened your leadership? If so, would you please describe the experience and its impact on your leadership? Have you ever observed someone else's leadership grow after an experience with failure? If so, would you please share that observation with me? Maybe you've observed a situation involving failure where the person did not grow. What did you observe about the impact on that individual?

Answers to these questions will be explored and analyzed in chapter five. The results will be shared with Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the specific independent school referenced. This project will serve as a resource for examining the effects of failure on leadership and how the lessons learned might inform their teaching on the subject with their respective students and colleagues.

CHAPTER 5: OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this research has been to identify whether or not failure may ultimately have a positive transformative impact on leadership development. To answer this question, I interviewed ten leaders at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school. The narrative accounts of the participants, along with key biblical figures and management literature, have been synthesized and analyzed. Overwhelmingly, the participants responded that they learned myriad lessons from failure. Ablaze with fresh research, the results of this project are designed to enhance the body of literature on the effects of failure on school leaders with an eye towards how this might inform teaching on the subject with students and educators.

Scripture reminds us that failure is commonplace. Romans 3:23 states that, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And while failure is never the goal, it provides us with valuable lessons. It prompts us to draw closer to God, to depend on him alone, to look to him as our ultimate leader. As we look at the lives of Adam and Eve, Saul, David, the Northern and Southern kings, Elijah, John Mark, Paul, and Peter, we see that God wants our hearts to be totally dedicated to him.

When we fail, it should break our heart. Through repentance and faith, our brokenness is redeemed in Jesus Christ. When we turn to God, in deep humility, he unleashes our greatest redemptive influence. All of life's successes and failures unite for kingdom impact.

God's redemptive hand is at work in the world, even amongst non-believers. We see this evident in the positive transformative impact that failure can have on leadership, regardless of religious background. A survey of management, psychological, and educational literature yields

tools that allow us to recognize failure and its impact. The tools offer a framework for managing the psychological wounds that accompany failure. After tending the wounds, we are better equipped to experience personal growth and to support the students and leaders under our influence as they take risks and encounter failure in their own lives. We view each individual as valuable, worthy, and an essential member of the community. We create an environment where people are valued as people and treated with integrity and human dignity.

Analysis of Results

The following analysis was drawn from ten research interviews conducted on the topic of failure. The interviews took place at a Washington, DC Metro Area independent school. The interviewees included senior school leaders in the academic, admission, advancement, department, diversity, division, and research realms. Amongst the administrators, there was diversity across a range of parameters that included age, education, ethnicity, gender, languages spoken, marital status, nationality, occupation, parental status, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Each interviewee was asked the same four questions. How would you describe failure? Have you ever had an experience with failure that ultimately strengthened your leadership? If so, would you please describe the experience and its impact on your leadership? Have you ever observed someone else's leadership grow after an experience with failure? If so, would you please share that observation with me? Maybe you've observed a situation involving failure where the person did not grow. What did you observe about the impact on that individual?

The results of the interviews were striking. Each participant was able to offer a description of failure. Some of the responses were concise. Other descriptions were longer and nuanced. One-hundred percent of the interviewees responded affirmatively that they had a

personal experience with failure that ultimately strengthened their leadership. Similarly, all ten participants confirmed that they had observed someone else's leadership grow after an experience with failure. But the data was not all positive. One-hundred percent of the interviewees also acknowledged that they had observed someone else fail and not learn any lessons from their experience.

The analysis of results is divided into four sections: failure described, lessons learned from personal failure, lessons learned from failure of others, and no lessons learned.

Failure Described

Merriam-Webster describes the essential meaning of failure in three key ways. The first description offered for failure is "a lack of success in some effort."[1] The second definition is "a situation or occurrence in which something does not work as it should."[2] The third way that failure is described is "an occurrence in which someone does not do something that should be done."[3] Interestingly enough, many of my interview participants touched upon a number of these distinctives. But they added something that Merriam-Webster could not, a human element. Each description of failure from my participants was an invitation into their innermost thoughts and sentiments on a topic that is often pushed to the corner.

Participant 1 was my first interviewee to describe failure. Of all of my interviewees, he offered the deepest analysis of what failure may and may not be.

> I would think about failure in two ways. I think the failure that I'm more concerned about is the failure to try. This obviously connects to somebody's

1. Merriam-Webster. "Failure." https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/failure.

2. Merriam-Webster. "Failure."

3. Merriam-Webster.

> confidence; to somebody's sense of support; to somebody's sense of commitment to the particular goal or person they're trying to help, or environment or community in which they live. To me, that's the more significant failure.
>
> Then, there's a failure to achieve a goal. I guess, I don't think about that quite as much because I'm concerned that failure is a very emotionally loaded word. Often, it's kind of felt as a reflection purely on an individual, or, purely on the people involved. In my experience, not achieving goals may be due to a range of different factors. It could be the lack of clarity of direction. It could be the lack of clarity of the goal to begin. Then again, it might be that the person pursuing the goal didn't really know what they wanted or that their supervisor didn't. Maybe the community didn't really know what they wanted or didn't really offer support. Also, I think there are all of these external or macro factors that influence success or failure. I can feel disappointed that something didn't happen or I didn't get everything I hoped for me or for the school. I don't think that's failure. Unless, there was something that I didn't want to do (and didn't), but it was important to do. Or, if the outcome would have been different, if I would have invested more planning time or effort and for some reason, I didn't. For that, I don't really let myself off the hook. The latter, I might still feel frustrated by, but, I don't feel regret over. I don't feel a sense of blame or too much responsibility. I feel a lot of responsibility for it at large. I don't feel a lot of responsibility for failures in the traditional sense of the word.
>
> I think I'm also pretty quick to say, 'We thought when we started this our goal was this…or, when we started this, we never thought about this…But then, we saw halfway through that oh, this is more important. We're going to adjust or swerve in this direction and we accomplished something different.' That's failure, perhaps, when you consider the original point of view. But, I actually wouldn't even say that is failure. It's more like we got everything we could out of this situation. We adapted and we should be taking pride in that. I think failure is sometimes connected to a kind of single-minded obsession, going to rigidity or, a lack of realism or even a perfectionism that is negative more than it is healthy.

Participant 1's description of failure has the power to contribute significantly to our understanding of failure. He flat out states that failure to achieve a goal is not what is most important. Other parameters, such as effort, matter much more. He acknowledges that course corrections are often necessary and should not be viewed negatively. Instead, doing the best in a given situation, is something that is worthy of pride and celebration.

Paradoxically, he reports that the "failure to even try" is more concerning than a missed objective. He notes that failure to try connects to someone's sense of confidence, sense of support, or commitment to a goal, or institution. There are leadership lessons and implications attendant to this line of thinking. If someone appears disconnected (failure to try), it may inhibit their success at a given task or in a particular environment. In such instances, how should a leader respond?

Participant 2 offered a more traditional description of failure. "I would say failure is the inability to meet a defined, stated, or documented goal. This may apply to an individual or organization. That would be my sort of thinking about failure."

During my third interview, Participant 3 discusses the idea of normalizing failure. This concept of "normalizing failure" merits deeper reflection. Management, psychological, and educational literature examine this practice as well. Participant 3 describes failure in his own words:

> Failure is something that one of our school leaders has been talking about fairly often recently, in a way that has really resonated with me. There's this idea of normalizing failure. There's this sort of low level failure that's just the essential consequence of doing things that are interesting. You know, doing things that are important. That whole bunch of times that stuff's not going to work. You try something out and who knows where it's going to go. And so, you think. You make your best guess. You plan and do whatever you can to prepare. Sometimes, it goes in a direction that you didn't see. That's just a normal part of doing something that matters. Hopefully, you deal with that with a positive attitude and an appropriate sense of humor. You try to keep moving forward. True failure is just giving up. It's giving up in the face of challenge.

Participant 4 also shared her thoughts on failure. "I think of failure in terms of mistakes. Some people could look at failure like it has to be like a big boom! You got fired! I guess, I'm

looking at it more like the little things along the way. It's like the things that make you better. You know, the things that you learn a lot from."

My next interviewee, Participant 5, introduced the imagery of a rubber band as he described failure.

> Failure to me is missing a mark that I aspire to. But I don't think failure is bad. I would characterize failure as, if it's not bad, it's good. It helps us identify our gaps, or holes, or soft spots. You know our weaknesses. I heard it by one of my favorite brain researchers. She used the imagery of the rubber band. You have rubber bands that are this big. And you have rubber bands that are this big. Generally, the rubber bands that are this big, that's your wheelhouse. That's the stuff you know well. You don't have to think much about it. It just comes natural to you. Think of playing major and minor scales. This comes naturally now. But when I first started learning major and minor scales, my rubber band was this big. I kept working and stretching and working and stretching and working and stretching. That could be defined as failure when I wasn't able to play all of the scales. But that's what failure does. It helps you identify those rubber bands that need stretched, that we need to work on. I tell students all the time that failure is good. That's exactly what you should be doing. Because that's going to help you identify and know your gaps, your soft spots, your weakness, those things that we need help with. That's why I love teaching this age so much. Because they just want to learn. For the most part, all they want to do is learn. They want to learn more and they want to explore. This is an absolutely safe place for them to do that. So, I think the word failure has a bad rap. Most people think of it as a negative, with a negative connotation. I've learned through my years that it's actually really helpful. It helps us learn. I strive to learn something new every day. When I don't learn something new, I know it at the end of the day. I think what kind of day was this that I didn't learn something? I never want to be the smartest person in the room all the time. I always try to glean something from somebody to make myself better.

In his description, Participant 5 reveals that failure has the ability to teach us something about ourselves. It can uncover our gaps, holes, and soft spots. It shows us where we need help. This has practical application. If we know where we need help, we can reach out for targeted support in that area. Similarly, others can offer support as well.

Participant 6 has a cheeky take on failure. "I would describe failure as opportunity to learn. If you've never failed, then, I guess you know everything. Because when you fail, you are

able to use that opportunity to adjust; to be flexible; to learn or to see something from a different perspective. So, I think to say that you've had success and never had failure…let's just say that you may have missed some opportunities."

Similar to Participant 2, Participant 7, relayed this about failure: "I would say it's at a time of one's life where you are trying to achieve a goal, personally or professionally, and then you fall short of it." Participant 8 adds another layer to our consideration of failure, disappointment.

"For me, failure is when I feel like I've given one hundred percent and just missed the mark. It's a very personal thing. Unfortunately, it's hard to measure. If I'm being reflective, then, I don't do well with disappointment. Whether it's disappointment with myself or someone whose opinion I care about."

Disappointment is an emotion that often accompanies failure.[4] Moltz discusses the importance of managing the emotional side of failure.[5] When processed in a healthy manner, the emotions that accompany failure can actually lead to growth. However, ignoring and stuffing those feelings can be extremely detrimental.

Participant 9 acknowledges her own journey and musings on failure. "I don't believe anybody successful didn't fail a lot first. Failure is essential to success. It has taken several years for me to realize that. But, I think the only real true failing is giving up. Otherwise, failures give an opportunity to learn what not to do."

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4. Barry J. Moltz, *Bounce! Failure, Resiliency, and Confidence to Achieve Your Next Great Success* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

5. Guy Winch, *Emotional First Aid: Practical Strategies for Treating Failure, Rejection, Guilt, and Other Everyday Psychological Injuries* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2013).

Our upbringing has the potential to strongly influence our feelings on failure. Participant 10 reflects:

> When I first considered the question, I was like, I think failure is the opposite of success. But because success is very subjective, and it varies from day to day, depending on what you're working on, and depending on the impact, and the weight of what you're doing, I think failure is not getting the intended result. It has taken a long time for me personally not to think about failure in a negative light. I did not grow up in a household where failure was an acceptable event. So, as an adult, I have had to get comfortable with it. Failure is also not a word that I use a lot of times. As an adult, I've had to get more comfortable with being like, okay, so, I didn't get to where I wanted to in this particular project and that's okay because I can keep trying. I also don't think failure is an end point.

Participant 10's description teaches two important lessons. The first lesson is that households may view failure differently. In some households, failure may be viewed as necessary on the path to success. In households like Participant 10's, failure was viewed negatively. It was not acceptable. Understanding the full range of how failure may be viewed is important for culturally competent leaders. The second lesson to learn from Participant 10 is that failure can be very uncomfortable. In a relatively short description, she twice mentions that as an adult, she has had to work hard to become comfortable with failure. This underscores the importance of normalizing failure for our students and fellow leaders.

Overwhelmingly, the leaders interviewed described failure as a tool that enables us to learn and grow. This view of failure sheds light on the leadership culture at the school interviewed. It would seem that there has been an intentionality in the environment to position failure as an opportunity to reflect, reconsider, and grow. Future researchers might want to explore how prevalent this open attitude towards failure is in other school communities.

Lessons Learned from Personal Failure

In addition to describing failure, all ten interview participants shared that they personally had an experience with failure that ultimately transformed their leadership in positive ways. The analysis below highlights four narrative accounts from three separate participants. The lessons gleaned from these narratives highlight the importance of personal connection, paying careful attention to one's team, prioritizing family, and maintaining integrity in difficult situations.

Participant 1 speaks about the importance of personal connection. Additionally, he offers insight into the most painful types of failures. To him, the most painful types of failures involve people not feeling seen and heard. As a leader, he describes those moments as "crushing." He posits that human connections within the school are what matter most.

> I think about that in terms of relationships with people. Oftentimes, it's somebody that I work with. Or, there could be a relationship with a school family here or at another school. I think back and it was not necessarily my failure always. Or, one sided. Sometimes, I think that if I'd really understood that I came across in this way, or, if I understood that somebody might have been thinking or feeling or hearing me in a certain way, things could have been different.
>
> I don't get too hung up on the failures like, we didn't build that building perfectly. Or, that initiative we set out to do ended up in a slightly different place. For whatever reason, I don't think about those type of moments as failures. Maybe I think about it like, if I'm going to do something new, maybe what went well and what didn't. It's more of a learning curve. For whatever reason, I think of failures in human terms. So what are they due to? Sometimes, they're probably due to me making assumptions because I didn't check.
>
> Sometimes it's me trying to find a graceful way through a situation that was going to be challenging and I should have just been direct. Sometimes it's knowing when to be patient. When to be direct. When I should just shut up and listen. When to reach out as opposed to waiting for someone else to reach out.
>
> When I think about failure, I can think back on particular things. There have been colleagues where I've sat down and said, "I just I don't think that conversation went very well and I bear some responsibility for that. I'm sorry." Or, I'm glad we're in a better place than we were a few years ago. But I just want to note that and say I value you. Or, you know the next time around, with somebody different,

> I'm going to do something different. So, that's probably what's made the biggest impact. I work on trying to be empathetic. Like, how might this come across right now? I can't have something landing exactly the way I want with you, especially when there's a hundred other people in the room. But thinking about that, versus the content, which is so often less important. I've learned that over time. Even if I'm not always great at learning "how," and "why." They matter more than the "what."
>
> You might be going throughout the day and have twenty conversations. Objectively, two of the conversations are really important. But, to the other people, all those twenty conversations matter because of the title you have. Therefore, if we're passing in the hallway, especially if we hadn't known each other forever, maybe you're a new faculty or staff member, you have to make eye contact. You have to smile. You have to be sincere. It doesn't have to be an hour but it has to not be dismissive. To me, a failure is when occasionally somebody will say, "I'm so glad to finally talk. You know it's been all year since we've had another conversation." To me, it's absolutely crushing. Because I think to myself, I hired you and welcomed you into this community and then…Those moments remind me that what really makes schools work, are the people.

Participant 8 experienced a catastrophic professional failure early in her career. Initially, it was devastating. In time, the pain of her experience lessoned and it led to even greater professional satisfaction and fulfillment. The lessons learned contribute to her excellent leadership today.

> I am a journalist by trade. After undergrad, I moved back home for six years. I was working for an Internet news agency, before Internet news was as common as it is now. We would work on those stories that would scroll at airports or doctors' offices. AP had a corner on the market and my boss at the time wanted to cut into the market share. I got to be a managing editor for that agency and we got sued by AP. They were going to try to shut us down and they named me personally in the suit. I was fresh out of college with my name being sued by the largest news agency in the world. Not because I did any plagiarizing, but my editors and the writers who reported to me were caught plagiarizing. In addition to that, my boss was just a terrible manager. Checks were missing. Still many years later, I am owed money. It was a terrible thing. It was devastating, conceptually. Because in my mind, I went to school to be a journalist. That was what I wanted to do. It was my purpose. And when the largest news agency in the world is suing you for plagiarism, that feels like it closes the door.
>
> That was it. It was an interesting reset. Because when I really thought about it, I looked at what I lost. I lost the idea of what I wanted to be in my career. I realized

> that journalism wasn't actually a passion of mine. It was just that I was in love with the idea. It taught me a lot about myself. But it also taught me a lot about paying attention to my teams. Making sure that not only am I making sure that they're trying correctly, but I'm checking in frequently. Because their work is a reflection on me. Ultimately, that experience was great. Because had I become a journalist, I certainly would not have made it into retail, which I loved; or communications, which I loved. So, it was an interesting moment. You think your life and your path is one thing and that's not it at all. But, that door had to be closed. And it was a painful, painful close. Luckily, I got married and therefore changed my last name. That helped tremendously professionally.

Despite deep pain, Participant 8 recovered. She learned that paying careful attention to one's team was essential. She also learned resilience. Just because one door closes, it does not mean that all other doors are closed. Sometimes our greatest disappointments are catalysts to our greatest joys.

Participant 5 presented two powerful examples of leadership transformations after failure. Through failure, he learned the significance of prioritizing family and maintaining integrity in difficult situations.

In a former career, Participant 5 was responsible for a large group of people overseas. In that role, he was the supervisor of an employee who had become far too complacent in his role. The employee was often late and did not perform his duties well. The substandard behavior had been tolerated by other supervisors. Participant 5 was different. He was exacting. He had high standards. He also admitted that he was young and arrogant. There came a point in time when the subordinate wanted to take leave. His father was critically ill and he wanted to take thirty days of leave to be with him.

Participant 5 bristled at the request. It was not the season for leave. The group had standard windows of time when leave could be taken. This was not the appropriate season for leave. The subordinate knew that Participant 5 did not think highly of him. He suspected that

Participant 5 would deny his request. He suspicion proved true. Participant 5 denied the leave. The subordinate persisted and put in a second request. Participant 5 said that he would approve the leave if the subordinate obtained a letter documenting the severity of his father's condition. The subordinate did just that.

By the time the subordinate's leave was finally approved, his father had passed away. Participant 5 describes that exact moment and the impact it had on his leadership. "I got in a space between him and his family. It really hurts me to even use this. But, that was a defining moment for me. I failed him and others that knew all that had transpired. At the time, I was much younger and probably a whole lot more arrogant. I didn't see past myself at that moment. I made it about me and not about him. That was an early professional failure that still helps defines who I am today. Because of how I value family, I knew better. But I allowed my arrogance to overwhelm my professionalism. Now, if someone tells me that they need to take care of a family matter, I say 'Go!' Anything that has to do with family, go."

While overseas in the same position, Participant 5 had another experience with failure that left an indelible mark on his leadership. He describes a situation where married men were working for 12-months overseas without their families. Unlike most of the men and women that he worked with, Participant 5's spouse and children were with him on his overseas assignment. To his chagrin, many of these men engaged in extra-marital relationships.

Participant 5 claimed that the extra-marital affairs were community knowledge. It was commonly accepted that these married men would return home to their families as if nothing had ever happened overseas. Most of the time, this was the case, but not always. In this regard, Participant 5 shared that:

> I failed by adjoining myself to the notion that it's going to be okay. Everybody does it right? The one person that I failed the most was my wife. Because we were hosting parties at our home. We were trying to take care of these guys by doing big Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. She saw what was going on and that's not who we are. But I didn't do anything. I guess at the time I thought I wasn't in a position of power to do something. I was threatened, perhaps, by any pushback that I might get.
>
> But you know, I always think of the little starfish analogy. A boy is down on the shore throwing starfish back into the water. An old man is looking and asks the boy what is he doing? The boy says that he is saving the starfish by throwing them back into the ocean. The old man says that there are thousands of starfish and that the boy would never make a difference. The little boy picks up a starfish, throws it back into the ocean, and tells the old man that he made a difference to that one.
>
> In my situation, I knew the right thing to do. So, even in situations where it's just overwhelming and it seems like you're not going to make any headway, headwinds are coming right at you, take a step in the right direction. Somebody is going to notice. It's going to make a difference in somebody's life. Right is right. Even if nobody is doing it. Wrong is wrong. Even if everybody is doing it.

In summary, all of the leaders interviewed confirmed that they had a personal experience with failure that ultimately had a positive, transformative, impact on their leadership. In the excerpted narratives, my interviewees demonstrated that they harvested leadership lessons from their failures. More specifically, they learned the importance of personal connection, paying careful attention to one's team, prioritizing family, and maintaining integrity in difficult situations.

Lessons Learned from Failure of Others

Weinzimmer explores how to learn from the mistakes of others. This is a vital leadership skill.[6] All of my interview participants expressed that they have observed someone else's leadership grow after an experience with failure.

6. Laurence G. Weinzimmer and Jim McConoughey, *The Wisdom of Failure: How to*

This analysis will highlight the accounts of four participants and the leadership transformations that they observed in others after bouts with failure. The harvested leadership lessons center upon fit, tenacity, and the ability to adapt. Participant 1 discusses the importance of a good "fit" between a leader and their school community.

> I have seen and known several peer leaders who basically had a bad experience in their role. It's not even that they necessarily did the job badly. But, it wasn't a good fit. With those key relationships, they alienated or were alienated in some way. In some ways, those folks absolutely can become really successful if they have a fresh start. One of the challenges is that nobody is at their best in their first three years. Or, if they are, they're in the wrong career because they're the people who are like restless. The challenge for veterans like us is, however, we were in our opening years. Perhaps we didn't understand the culture or we were new, or a little less secure. Do we let ourselves grow out of that and do others give us the grace to grow out of it? I think about peers who have had these really tough experiences. Some of them just probably got the wrong job. They walked in blind and somebody should have shown them how to see.

Participant 1 continued to share the necessity of a good "fit." He stated that he has observed good people perform adequately. Then, upon shifting to another role, that same individual performed brilliantly. He mentioned that this sometimes happens when individuals are better suited for one job over another. Sometimes this is a result of lack of awareness either on the part of the institution or the individual. But he has also observed failure that is simply failure. He believes that working in schools is a calling, not just a job. Failure can occur when people do not buy into the mission or vision of the school. In those instances, it can be helpful to coach people into the needed mindset or counsel them out.

Just as a proper "fit" is essential in the life of a leader, so is tenacity. Participant 5 candidly talks about his son's journey with failure. Despite numerous setbacks, his son continued

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Learn the Tough Leadership Lessons Without Paying the Price (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

to give his best. Ultimately, his tenacity paid off and he received a once in a lifetime leadership opportunity.

> I will talk about my middle child. But, I'm going to frame it by talking about my other children first. My oldest son could take this book, put it on his head, take it off, and know everything. My daughter and my youngest boy are like that. But my middle child has to read every page twice. But man, people just swarm to him. They gravitate towards him. He went to West Point. After graduation, he said, "I have to find myself." So, he went to John Deere in Iowa.
>
> He works for John Deere. I wish he was here to describe it to you. The whistle blows, so this shift goes on break. But wait a minute, all of them get a bonus if they just get these devices from the other shift through that line. "Come on guys, we have ten more to go and we all get a bonus." The response was, "No, man. I'm going to go on break." So, my son goes down there to finish things himself. But he's told to stop because it's not his job. He continued working there for about five years and then he said he was done. He went from John Deere to Walmart.
>
> He became the general manager of two Walmart stores in Virginia. He transformed the stores. They would come in and take pictures and publish them on websites. He was even named store manager of the year. Then, they let him go. Like how does that happen? He then goes to manage a health facility. He does a remarkable job there as well. After transforming the facility, he's let go and told that the company is going in a different direction. All of these companies, these businesses, these transformations, get him to a point where he says he done with retail. He said, "I'm done. I'm not doing that anymore. I'm going to teach." He took a job at a school in northern Virginia teaching seventh grade math. He loved it. But then, they weren't going to give him any benefits until he took his praxis and put in so much time. But guess who calls? The United States Military Academy at West Point. They called and said they needed a career recruiter. Through all of this trial and failure he ended up at a place far above and beyond what he would have aspired to. In full disclosure, we are a family of spirituality and faith. That defines everything that we do. That was an intervention for him. Now, do I even characterize all of the setbacks as failures for him? I don't know. Those setbacks were devastating for him. I had to pull him back from some real depression. I can't think of moments of refinement, failure perhaps, more than what he has experienced. But that has changed. That was two months ago.

Participant 5's son undoubtedly had his share of professional failures. Termination is rarely, if ever, regarded as a success. Nevertheless, he persevered with each job opportunity. He gave his best and greatly improved the performance of each enterprise. Yet, he suffered setbacks.

His experiences with failure demonstrate that tenacity is a trait that excellent leaders exhibit. Further, his story is one of redemption. All of his peaks and valleys culminated in a story for God's glory.

Participants 8 and 9 shared their observations of a colleague's remarkable ability to adapt after several encounters with failure. Their colleague was talented. In many regards, he could do his job well. The challenge? He was equally talented at alienating key stakeholders. He was gruff with his supervisor and fellow staff members. He was equally curt and snippy with trustees. Despite feedback to this effect, his behavior did not change.

Participant 9 had the unpleasant task of informing her employee that he would need to improve his behavior or he would no longer have a job. This conversation had an immediate impact on the employee. He immediately began to work on how he interacted with his boss, colleagues, and trustees.

So striking was this transformation, that it was mentioned by Participant 8 as well. When discussing the transformation, Participant 8 talks about the stark contrast. She articulated that the employee went from being overly critical to more of a team player. He softened the way he communicated with others. In turn, the school truly benefitted from his needed expertise. Both Participant 8 and 9 relayed that the school would lose a valuable asset if the employee were ever to leave the school.

In this instance, after fumbling with interpersonal relationships with nearly everyone he worked with, the employee experienced a transformation. With his employment in jeopardy, he was able to work within himself to adapt to meet the needs of his employer. His experience with failure and the transformation that followed, demonstrate that adaptability can result from failure.

No Lessons Learned

Harvesting leadership lessons from failure is a redemptive act. However, not everyone learns from failure. Despite all that failure can teach us, sometimes lessons are simply not learned. All of my interviewees attested to observing someone not learning lessons from failure. In these instances, the individuals received feedback on their failures and were given the opportunity to improve. Regrettably, there was no improvement. In each of the accounts below, the individuals ended up parting ways with their school or company.

Participant 9 shares about a leader who failed to actually lead. But first, she references herself. She shares that early in her career, she personally made the mistake of being overly hierarchical. She then discusses a leader who was the total opposite. The leader who failed and did not learn any lessons, relied too heavily on consensus.

> I think there are limits, too, to having a management style that is too much about consensus building. I had a boss who was so afraid of conflict that she only managed by consensus. It was a disaster. We never had a clear direction. Staff meetings were endless debates. Decisions weren't based on the merits of an argument. Instead, they were based on what was going to be the most popular solution. And that department was very political. The whole culture was very political. In this department, there were all these alliances. It's wild to think about how much energy was burned up by all this sort of alliance forming. And the alliances wouldn't have formed if it didn't matter. You couldn't sway decisions or a vision without doing this. This manager didn't try to change her style, despite the problems it caused. Staff began to leave and she still didn't change her style. Then, I left. That manager left the company shortly after I did. Today, there's not a single person still working in that fifteen person department from when she was the manager. We are in a highly relational business. You do not want total turnover if you can avoid it.

The manager that left the company, ultimately, became an independent consultant. I asked Participant 9 if she thought that the former manager would find greater success as a consultant or if she thought her need for consensus would still be problematic. Participant 9 pondered the question and landed on this opinion. "A consultant is supposed to come in and say,

‘This is how it should be.’ A lot of times what they're doing is talking to people to get information. I suspect that person is still being swayed by the feedback they're getting from the client. That is not what you want from a consultant.”

Participant 1’s observation of someone that did not learn from failure approaches the subject from a completely different angle. He thinks that this type of failure usually has little to do with the institution or environment. He finds this to be particularly true when the environment is supportive. In these instances, he believes that there is something happening on a deeper level.

> I guess I'd say in those situations the impact was conditioned by something within the person. In my experience, I think for the people who really fail and do not recover, it’s normally the result of something more on the personal side. Perhaps there's been a trauma within one’s family, life, their circle, the people they love, who have raised them or vice versa. I would also say that sometimes the people who experience failure and do not grow from it were probably already vulnerable. They were probably already really insecure about their own ability or they did not have a support network. That's what happens.

Participant 1’s observations open the door for further consideration. When an employee experiences something of a personal nature that impacts performance, how should the school respond? How should it respond to its employees? How should it respond to its students?

Participant 10 revisits an experience from a prior place of employment:

> At a former company, the leadership just failed to recognize the impact that one employee was having. This employee was in a leadership role. As much as the senior executives tried to counsel him and support him to do better, the energy and his management style really got to a horrible level of toxicity. People were actively trying to leave the company or change departments. The senior executives offered a range of solutions. Initially, they left it up to him to be accountable, to mature and do better. The senior executives realized that improvement was not happening. When they really sat down and listened to what people were experiencing with him, they were collectively like, ‘We didn't know it was this bad. We have to own that. We have to take some action.’ Ultimately, that individual no longer had a future with the company.

In each of these scenarios, despite direct feedback, no lessons were learned. Therefore, it is imperative that leaders take seriously the challenges and opportunities that arise with failure. If not, leaders will likely repeat a cycle of failure with no lessons learned.

Summary

In summary, there are a number of lessons that can be harvested from failure, our response to it, and how it can create resiliency and enhance our leadership. Failure is common, universal, and inevitable. It was prevalent in biblical leaders and remains prevalent in leaders today. Some individuals experience failure and in fear, shame, and humility, seek to hide their shortcomings at all costs. Other individuals openly embrace the experience of failure and view it as a learning tool.

Individuals who embrace failure as a learning opportunity may process the experience of failure by acknowledging it, feeling the emotions that accompany it, and intentionally moving forward. This process of moving forward often involves getting support, regaining control, taking responsibility, owning the fear, and managing performance pressure. Embracing vocabulary that positions failure as neutral, harnessing the power of imagery, grieving when failure occurs, and unconditional self-acceptance are also helpful tools. Employing these tools creates resiliency and bolsters healthy risk taking. In turn, this enhances our leadership.

Leaders who have experienced positive transformation after failure have learned the importance of empathy, paying careful attention to their teams, prioritizing family, maintaining integrity, and adapting. They have personally experienced the redemptive leadership model. In turn, they are equipped to see God's redemptive work in those around them. Harvesting these leadership lessons allows us to unleash our fullest impact for the kingdom of God.

Areas for Future Research

The results of this research were limited to ten Washington, DC Metro Area school leaders. Based upon this research, it is likely that if we conducted further research, we may discover something about how other educators process failure. Continued research on the impact of failure on leadership is needed if we are to realize our greatest kingdom influence. Areas for future research that were identified in the context of this thesis-project, are listed below.

(1) *The way an institution views failure.* Overwhelmingly, the selected sample of Washington, DC Metro Area school leaders interviewed described failure as a tool that enables us to learn and grow. This view of failure sheds light on the leadership culture at the school interviewed. It would seem that there has been an intentionality in the environment to position failure as an opportunity to reflect, reconsider, and grow. Future researchers might want to explore how prevalent this open attitude towards failure is in other school communities and its implications for the school's overall health and growth.

(2) *The manner in which schools support individuals who have experienced personal crises.* A key school leader observed that employee performance failure was often the result of a crisis moment in the life of an employee. How might schools anticipate the increased needs of employees who experience an acute crisis and build supports into place to assist the employee and the school?

(3) *The means by which school leaders uncover their blind spots*. Failure has the ability to teach us something about ourselves. It can uncover our gaps, holes, and soft spots. It shows us where help is needed. This has practical application for schools. If leaders understand where they need help, they can reach out for targeted professional development support. Similarly, schools can offer resources to further develop their leaders.

(4) *Concrete strategies to normalize failure in the workplace and classroom*. Within the selected sample, this thesis-project has demonstrated that failure can have a positive, transformative, impact on leadership. The development of a guidebook that contains practical ways to normalize failure in the workplace and classroom would benefit educators, particularly those who were not raised in households where failure was viewed as an acceptable event.

Personal Reflections

Having completed this research, I have acquired a deeper understanding of failure and its impact on personal and professional development. I first became acquainted with the idea of failure as a part of the redemptive leadership model in my master's coursework at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. It revolutionized my understanding of spiritual development. Instead of the stigma and shame that often accompany failure, I began to understand that leaders could emerge stronger, after processing failure.

This evolved my understanding of God's redemptive work in humanity. It had meaningful implications for my life, leadership, and ministry. So much so, that I singularly desired a Doctor of Ministry in the Redemptive Leadership track. Understanding that failure is a part of each person's journey, allows us to recover and move forward. Failure is not an end point. My hope is that this work offers readers, most notably, school leaders, insight into how failure can ultimately have a positive, transformative impact on leadership, if viewed through a redemptive lens.

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VITA

Full Name: Monique Danielle McMillan-Jackson

Date and Place of Birth: March 28, 1979, United States

Education/Degrees: Morgan State University, Bachelor of Science, Accounting, 2001; Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Master of Arts, Christian Leadership, 2018.

Years of D.Min. Work: 2019-2022

Expected Graduation: May 2022